

[the Wild and the Divine](#) by [Luddleston](#)

Category: Hades (Video Game 2018)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Modern with Magic, Anal Sex, Canon-Typical Violence, Exes to Lovers, First Meetings, First Time, Love Confessions, M/M, Masturbation, Monsters, Nereid Achilles, Olympian family drama, Oral Sex, Phone Sex, Rimming, Sugar Daddy, Threesome - M/M/M, Updates bi-weekly, god meddling galore, sexy boxing practice

Language: English

Characters: Achilles (Hades Video Game), Chaos (Hades Video Game), Hermes (Hades Video Game), Megaera (Hades Video Game), Patroclus (Hades Video Game), Thanatos (Hades Video Game), Zagreus (Hades Video Game)

Relationships: Achilles/Patroclus (Hades Video Game), Achilles/Patroclus/Zagreus (Hades Video Game), Achilles/Zagreus (Hades Video Game), Patroclus/Zagreus (Hades Video Game)

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2021-09-14

Updated: 2022-04-03

Packaged: 2022-12-19 10:47:29

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 13

Words: 44,758

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

What do you do when you find out your sugar baby is the Prince of Hell, a literal god, and breaking things off because he's afraid his insane family is going to murder you?

No, seriously, Achilles would like an answer, because apparently *'calling your ex-boyfriend of fifteen years and admitting that, no, you did not get your life together after your divorce'* isn't it.

1. the Lover & the Hero

Author's Note:

WELCOME FRIENDS, TO THE LONG FIC

This has been some time in the making, I started writing it in April! For ways to support me in this novel-length endeavor and read draft chapters and early releases (and at least one bonus scene), [look here!](#)

Will be updating every other week!



Achilles' phone rang just as he was getting out of the shower, which he'd normally consider quite unfortunate timing.

When the caller ID was not one of the multitude of people who would take no qualms in contacting him after working hours had ended, and instead just Z, he revised that opinion.

The timing was actually quite good.

He slung a towel around his hips before answering, perching on the edge of his bathroom vanity. "Afternoon, lad." Despite the deliberate casualness in his tone, he felt a deep bloom of nerves in his chest. Zagreus had to be calling about what Achilles had sent him last night, which, while it'd just been an audio recording, was quite...

Revealing.

"Achilles, oh my god." Zagreus sounded sleepy and muffled, like he was lying down with his face smushed into a pillow.

"You, ah, listened to it?" Achilles fiddled with his hair, pulling it out of the bun he'd put it in so it didn't get completely soaked in his shower.

"Mm. Twice," Zagreus said. There was a shifting of what sounded like sheets, making Achilles surer that Zagreus was lying in bed. "Got off the first time, the second time was just to hear your voice—and then I thought I ought to call you, because listening to it again would just be silly."

Achilles continued rearranging his hair, responding with a soft hum of consideration just to give himself a moment to think. And a moment to imagine Zagreus stretched out on the bed, loose-limbed from orgasm, messy sheets having been kicked to the side, all of him bare to the world. Shortly after their 'meeting' due to Achilles' ill-conceived venture onto a dating site (the name of which he abhorred because the idea of being a 'sugar daddy' was almost enough to keep him from making an account despite his coworker's glowing recommendation) Zagreus had started sending Achilles pictures. These were also accompanied by occasional video evidence of what he claimed was Achilles' doing, although Achilles thought he would probably still be getting off whether or not Achilles was involved.

Achilles shifted, self-control slipping away like it hadn't since he was much, much younger. The things this man did to him.

"What are you thinking about?" Zagreus asked, because Achilles had not answered him. Is it how good I must look right now? Because I look good right now. Want to see?"

He should have said no, should have said he was going to be late to dinner with his mother, but god, did he want to see Zagreus. "Show me."

"Mmkay. Give me a moment." Achilles could hear him shifting, breathing. God, he both appreciated and despised the new headphones he'd bought Zagreus. He could hear everything. "Alright, sent."

The photo was what sealed Achilles' fate. He looked at it for one second before closing it, opening a new text. *I'll be about 30min late.* He then silenced his text alerts from his mother, so he wouldn't be interrupted.

"Zagreus, you've absolutely no business looking so lovely," he teased, resting one hand over his lap. He put Zagreus on speaker so that he could

keep looking.

The photo showed Zagreus spread out on his bed, one hand pushed into his unruly dark hair, his lower lip caught between his teeth, his pretty bi-colored eyes half-lidded. The lighting in Zagreus' bedroom was terrible, shitty fluorescents, but it caught the shine of perspiration on his chest and the tempting curve of his pectorals. The photo was just the slightest bit blurry, as if Zagreus' hand was shaking a little.

"Well, you've got no business sounding so lovely," Zagreus said.

"I'm glad it was to your liking." Achilles wasn't particularly sure what Zagreus liked about his voice, it was just his voice, but Zagreus begged Achilles just to talk to him whenever they called like this. *Don't stop, just tell me how you want me.*

"To my liking,' pfft, I came so hard I gave myself a cramp, had to stretch afterward and everything," Zagreus said. *"Bet you look nice right now, too. Did you just get home from work?"*

"About an hour ago, yes." Achilles thumbed open another photo Zagreus sent him, this time with his fingers in his mouth instead, his eyes looking right at the camera, right at Achilles. God. This was supposed to be an easy way to ask somebody for sex, not a re-examining of Achilles' entire concept of beauty which was now comprised mostly of Zagreus' mouth. "I'm... supposed to be going to dinner with my mother." He wasn't entirely sure why he added that. It wasn't the kind of thing one brought up in a relationship like this. "I just got out of the shower." There, that was better.

"Oh, so you're still all wet, then?" Zagreus asked, a note of teasing in it. *"Too bad I can't come dry you off."*

"I took care of that already, thanks," Achilles said, untucking the edge of the towel but leaving it lying across his lap. It didn't honestly matter, he was the only person in the house, but there was something tantalizing about waiting to strip completely, about palming himself through the soft fabric.

"Then I wish I was there to get you dirty again." Zagreus' voice dropped just a little as he moved from flirting to actively seducing Achilles. They had been doing this for long enough that Achilles was familiar with this shift. *"Apologies to your mum if I make you late to dinner, but I was calling with attempt to rile you up, sir."*

God, the way his lips curled around that title was going to drive Achilles mad. *I certainly won't call you 'daddy,'* Zagreus had said at the start of this all. *Too many issues there.*

Achilles had replied that he certainly did not want to be called 'daddy,' either. 'Sir' would suffice. Zagreus had grinned like that was his plan all along.

"The way you said my name in that video." It hadn't been a video, but Achilles did not correct him. *"Right at the end. Were you coming?"*

Achilles leaned back until his shoulders rested against the mirror, slipping a little in the fog that had covered it while he'd showered. "Yes," he admitted. It had been uncomfortable at first, recording himself while he got off, and there were frequent gaps at the beginning of the recording where he'd forgotten he was supposed to be audible. He'd slipped into it more easily the more he worked himself up, but it was still strange not to have Zagreus responding when Achilles spoke.

He'd gotten used to hearing Zagreus' voice when he touched himself, and he wasn't certain when exactly in their arrangement that had become his normal.

"Ha! Knew it," Zagreus said, the shape of a smile in his voice. *"And right now? Are you touching yourself?"*

"Yes," he said again, slipping the towel off his hips, letting it pool out underneath him on the vanity counter. He made a noise when he got his hand around his cock that Zagreus appreciated, if his giggling was any indication.

"Bet you look good like that." This was yet another instance of Zagreus dropping what he must have thought were subtle hints that he wanted to see what Achilles looked like. Achilles hadn't yet returned Zagreus' habit of sending photos, because, well...

Because it felt *real* if the man whose rent Achilles was paying in exchange for these sorts of conversations knew his face.

"Not half as good as you," Achilles said, deflecting. He stroked his cock almost lazily, wondering what Zagreus would say if he decided he really was late, and was going to have to call Zagreus back later that night.

"Oh, yeah, of course I look good. Bet you wish I was in your bed with you right now." Zagreus, as always, was a font of self-confidence, none of it misplaced.

"I'm not in bed, I'm just... I'm still in the bathroom, sitting on the counter," Achilles said.

Zagreus hummed, a laugh hidden in the end of it. *"I'm quite proud to have distracted you enough to have kept you here."* He groaned, unashamedly loud but not faking it. Simply bold, because that was how Zagreus was. Achilles bet his neighbors hated him. *"Is your bathroom big enough that I could get on my knees in front of you there? I'm good with my mouth."*

"The bathroom is big enough for that, but I think the counter is too tall." Achilles' feet couldn't touch the ground, his toes resting on the drawer-pull. "Unless you are quite tall, I suppose."

"I am gifted in many things, height is not one of them," Zagreus said. *"So I guess I could not get on my knees. I could still suck your cock, though."*

Achilles had clearly been kidding himself when he imagined stopping this before he came. Well, he supposed, it'd at least be a way to unwind before dinner inevitably worked all the tension back into him. "You have such a pretty mouth," he sighed.

"So I hear," Zagreus said, because Achilles had said something to that effect in the recording he'd sent. *"It's not just pretty, my mouth is quite talented, too."*

"I'm aware."

Zagreus didn't just have a talented mouth, he also seemed to have a little bit of an oral fixation, and frequently sent Achilles pictures with his fingers in his mouth, or a toy, or, on one memorable occasion, a video involving a popsicle that really shouldn't have made Achilles as hard as it did. The part of that video he'd liked best, though, was the very end, when Zagreus coughed a little and remarked that *damn, I didn't think it'd be that cold!*

"Sir, please, tell me what you want me to do to you," Zagreus said, his voice so breathy Achilles had no doubt he was touching himself, too. Achilles knew this tone well enough that he could reasonably assume Zagreus was fingering himself.

"You tease me with your mouth so often, I... I must admit, I think of that."

"Don't sound so embarrassed, sir, I just fucked myself to your voice, I won't be scandalized if you tell me you think about my lips around your cock."

The things that came out of his mouth. Zagreus talked about liking Achilles' voice, but his own was ridiculously sultry at times, the charming lilt of his accent turning breathy and raw when he talked dirty. Achilles would have been embarrassed by how quickly it got him off, except that Zagreus seemed delighted by it. *Probably less work for him*, said the nasty little self-doubting part of Achilles' brain.

"You should buy me a toy that's the same size as your cock," Zagreus suggested, as if that didn't nearly do Achilles in. *"That way, even though I can't see you in person, I can still have you in me."*

"Zagreus!"

"Just got my fingers right now—I touched myself here while I was listening to you earlier—you know, I was trying to time myself so that I could come at

the same time as you. Didn't quite work, though, I finished first."

Zagreus got like this sometimes when he was aroused. Babbling, confessional. It turned Achilles on more than he could entirely express, more than he could stand.

"I was imagining you were here with me, imagining you were fucking me. Well, maybe not here, here, my apartment's a shithole, but blood and—sir, I want you so bad I can't stand it."

"I... I want you, too," Achilles said, only able to make such admissions because he was so desperately close. And he did want Zagreus, wanted this charming, beautiful man in his arms so badly it was dangerous—that was why all of this happened over the phone.

If Achilles saw him in the flesh, he might damn well fall in love, and that'd never worked well for him.

"Ah, that's good. I... Achilles, I feel so, ngh! Please, just fuck me!" Once again, so loud his neighbors were probably banging on the opposite wall.

"I've got you," Achilles lied. But how could he do anything but, with Zagreus begging for him on the other end of the phone?

He curled in on himself as he came, nearly dropping the phone, steadying himself in time to see another photo from Zagreus. His head was cut out of this one, so that he could frame the full length of his body, his hand resting over his spent cock and splatters of come over his belly.

"Did you see?"

"Oh, I saw." Achilles laughed, moved to pass his hand over his face and then remembered it was splattered with come. He leaned to the side to push the sink handle with the heel of his hand and rinsed off his fingers. "You look incredible, lad, had I not just come before I got that picture..."

"Glad to hear it. Mm, thanks for that."

"Of course." Achilles should have been the one thanking Zagreus. "I—oh, dammit." His phone was ringing. "My mother's—"

"Oh, yeah, no problem. I'll talk to you later, alright?"

"Right. Yes." Achilles thought he might need to take another shower.

He very much did not have time to take another shower.

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When they'd finally decided that their lives would be better off if they quit keeping up the convenience of remaining married, Mia had said: *"You're going to have to get used to disappointing your mother once in a while, Achilles."*

He had not gotten used to disappointing his mother, because he'd never been as strong a person as Mia had wanted him to be, and because Thetis commanded an air of utmost respect from everybody, particularly her own son. And so, Achilles was duly chagrined as he turned up half an hour late to dinner looking a bit of a mess, because he'd not had time to properly style—properly tame, that is—his hair.

Thetis, as always, looked immaculate, watching him archly over the rim of her wineglass. She was dressed all in summery sea-green that matched her eyes, and therefore matched Achilles', too, the fanciful color turned serious by the severity of the angles in her sheaf dress and the blue-white blazer she wore draped over her shoulders. One would be amiss to think that this woman was not immensely powerful, and Achilles felt like an unruly child in her presence, even as she smiled and greeted him with as much warmth as she ever did.

There was no mistaking that the two of them were related, although few would have guessed that Achilles was her son. She did not look old enough to have a child nearing forty, a fact which Achilles had always taken for granted until one of his coworkers remarked that she'd hardly be able to tell Thetis had any work done if she didn't know she was in her mid-sixties. He'd always assumed she was just like that naturally, and the fact that

Achilles managed to age at all was inherited from his father. Of course, it felt a little silly once he thought about it, but his mother did always seem to come by her beauty honest.

"I'm sorry I'm late, I..." he said, and then realized he had no idea what excuse to make. *I was on the phone with my definitely-not-a-sugar-baby.*

"It's no matter, Achilles," she said. "I haven't been waiting long, and of course I'd wait much longer for the rare occasion on which I get to see you."

Before Achilles could even make his preferences known, the waiter approached with his usual glass of red wine. He wasn't sure when they'd started coming here enough that they had a 'usual'. Perhaps it was simply the fact that the staff heard the name 'Pelides' and paid them more attention than the average customer.

His mother's gift for easy, casual conversation was hard-won. She was not the type for small-talk, but for a beautiful woman in the film industry, charm was as important as talent. Achilles would have had it much easier had he also decided to go into acting, but being behind the scenes was more his forte, and stunt work always had been interesting (even though he was working in a more administrative role now thanks to his damn ankle).

And he'd never be able to live up to what a skilled actress his mother was. She only dropped his persona when she had no need to entertain, her only audience being Achilles. It meant they were mostly quiet through dinner, and that when Thetis finally did pick up a topic of conversation, it was with purpose.

"There is something I have been meaning to talk with you about, Achilles."

Achilles had several guesses and liked none of them. He nodded anyway, resigning himself to an uncomfortable conversation.

"It is a family matter," she said, which narrowed his guesses to all the worst ones.

"Mother, if this is about Mia and I—"

"Of course not."

Out of the corner of his eye, Achilles saw the hostess approach the table with their check, but she stopped short, guessing correctly from Thetis' posture that this was not the best moment.

"I believe I've said all I care to on the topic of your divorce." She certainly had, almost exactly one year ago when he'd told her everything was finalized. "No, this is something more... private. I do not wish to discuss it here, but I wanted to know when you're next available."

Achilles was free approximately never; what time he had that was not filled by work had lately been devoted to Zagreus. But he could make some space on his calendar if only to sate his curiosity. Unfortunately, given the way his and his mother's schedules were currently arranged, they determined that curiosity was going to have to linger for a good few weeks.

He thought of asking her for additional details while he walked her to her car—a sleek black antique that was driven by a man Achilles did not recognize—but Thetis took that opportunity to tell him how much she wished Achilles had at least had a child before breaking things off with his wife. Never mind the fact that neither of them had ever had time to devote to a relationship with one another, much less to raising a child.

If she was bringing this up to keep Achilles from questioning her further, it was an effective tactic.

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Achilles poured himself a glass of scotch after he returned home, remembering how his father used to complain about his mother 'wasting' expensive liquor on ordinary evenings. Maybe Achilles did take after her in more than looks. If he didn't indulge himself from time to time, he suspected he'd be a complete displeasure to work with. He'd be a complete displeasure to do anything else with, he reminded himself, as he did have at least one non-familial relationship that was not work-related.

If one could call it a relationship.

His phone pinged because he'd forgotten to mute Zagreus' text chain, and Achilles was simply glad Zagreus hadn't sent this during dinner, as Achilles had the habit of leaving his phone face-up on the table in case somebody needed him.

Zagreus had sent him a video, just of his face, filmed as if his phone was propped up in his bed beside him. Zagreus tipped his head to the side, looking at the camera, his mouth dropping open, eyes rolling back—Achilles swore he was coming.

He turned up the volume.

The pitch of Zagreus' moan basically confirmed that yes, he was coming, but more importantly...

Achilles could hear his *own voice* in the background.

"*Oh, Zagreus, I—!*"

He winced as he set his phone down. Did he really sound like that?

Another text from Zagreus popped up. *Might be listening to you again.*

What the hell was he *doing*? Achilles momentarily panicked, imagining that his mother's 'private family matter' was that she'd found out Achilles had been fooling around with a man twelve years his junior. Of course, there was no way for her to learn such a thing, but the shame struck him anyway.

"*Get your life together, and we'll see,*" Patroclus had told him, nearly two years ago. (Twenty-one months. Achilles wasn't counting, of course not.)

This was not 'getting his life together'. This was not even anything close.

Achilles swallowed the last of his drink, locked his phone, and took his glass to set it in the sink. He didn't respond to Zagreus, which wasn't going to bother the lad. They often went long stretches of time without communicating, and neither minded, because Achilles paid Zagreus whether or not they spoke.

He did play the video again, though, once he was in bed with all the lights shut off. Achilles may not have had his life together, may not have had the marriage and the family his mother had wanted or the work-life balance that Mia had wanted or the ability to maintain relationships that Patroclus had wanted...

But he had a boy who loved his voice, and who smiled at him like a sunbeam at the very end of the recording, and somehow, that was the best part.

2. the Prince & the Parking Garage

Summary for the Chapter:

A first date, and a whole host of first-other-things.

Notes for the Chapter:

ZAG POV YAY!! For a time, I really wanted the start of this chapter to be the beginning of the fic itself, but that bathroom phone sex thing was too good. Sorry this is late-ish btw, I keep full-on forgetting to post it.

Now that Zagreus knew a little more about the world, it made sense that the mouth of hell was located in the lower floors of a parking garage.

It meant that every time Zagreus walked out of the Underworld he smelled motor oil and exhaust and felt cool concrete beneath his burning feet for just a moment before he activated the mortal disguise he'd learned was best to use if he didn't want to either do some serious explaining or convince the mortals that saw him they were dreaming.

Today, it was hot even though the sun had just gone down, and the air was humid enough that every breath Zagreus took felt wet. He was still battered from his latest escape, needed to get to his shithole and heal up. Thankfully, the derelict parking structure he emerged into was in a part of town where nobody would bat an eye at a man with bruises on all the major surfaces of his body.

He wiped a thumb over his upper lip as he felt his nose dripping and it came away red. Bleeding, then. Great. It continued to do so, staining his teeth, the metallic taste flooding his tongue. He stripped off the backpack and the jacket he affected as part of his mortal guise, slinging both over his arm to relieve some of the heat. Distantly, he could hear the buzzing of insects and the whoosh of the highway. The cars were loud, but they were nothing compared to the train tracks that ran what Zagreus thought was dangerously close to his building.

The wooden steps leading up to the apartment were narrow. Several had cracks, one was entirely missing, and the others were so uneven Zagreus had to concentrate hard to keep from stumbling. His ribs ached with every step, bruised or broken, but it was nothing he couldn't fix.

He hardly had the strength to shoulder the door open. The wood had swollen from the increased heat and humidity, making it impossible for it to swing open naturally. The building was not air-conditioned, and Zagreus had left the windows closed, so his place was practically a furnace. He yanked open the one window that didn't stick, not currently equipped to muscle open the other two.

Zagreus dropped his backpack and jacket on the narrow mattress shoved into the corner, not bothering with turning on the lights as he walked toward what passed for a kitchen, grabbing a handful of take-out napkins he'd kept on the counter to mop up the blood on his face. This place would have been a one-room apartment if not for the bathroom, which, thankfully, was separated from the rest. The apartment frequently did not have hot water, the lights flickered sometimes, and Zagreus swore he was going to get electrocuted by the microwave, so he tried to avoid most appliances. Zagreus was 'subletting' the place and therefore did not have any way to contact the person who actually owned the building to get much of anything fixed, but oh well. It was home. Ish. More home than his father's House had ever been.

Today, the hot water wouldn't be an issue, because a cold shower would be nice.

He was about to strip and see exactly how badly he was bruised, when he heard footsteps coming up the staircase, loud and quick enough to be only one person.

Hermes did not have to knock, perfectly capable of just phasing through the doorway, but he did anyway, probably only because he'd once caught Zagreus jerking off and did not want a repeat experience. Thankfully not while Zagreus was on the phone with Achilles.

"Come in!" he called, and then Hermes did phase through the doorway, appearing also dressed like a mortal, in a pair of running shorts and a t-shirt that had the sleeves cut off. He still had wings on his head and his feet, so it was a fashion choice, not a concern about being seen. Hermes *did* flick on the lights as he entered, and the bulb blinked a couple times before coming on.

"Heya, coz! I thought I saw you making your way up here, and I decided I'd be decent and bring you something to eat, given that you're—whoa, okay, say thank you, if you will." He was mock-offended because Zagreus had snatched the bag out of his hand.

He muttered something that passed for *thanks* around bites. He swore to all the gods Hermes (and therefore, Zagreus) was the only person keeping the gyro place around the corner open. And said gyros were the only thing keeping Zagreus from feeling like absolute shit every time he made it up to the surface.

"Actually, I've changed my mind, don't say thank you if you're gonna do it with your mouth open. That's just rude."

Zagreus did him the courtesy of swallowing before answering. "You'd eat this fast, too, if you were this beat-up and food actually had the ability to heal you."

Hermes peeled open Zagreus' mini-fridge ('peeled' was the accurate verb because it was constantly sticky) and tossed him a canned energy drink that Zagreus didn't remember being in there before, replacing it with something else from inside the messenger bag, with a note that he was giving Zagreus a frequent customer gift from Charon. Yeah, right. Zagreus took the energy drink—he didn't really need the caffeine but he did need to keep from choking, so he cracked it open and took a drink before finishing up the gyro Hermes had brought him at absolutely ridiculous speed.

"I have no idea how you've got a boyfriend, that was thoroughly disgusting," Hermes said.

"He's not my boyfriend, actually," Zagreus said, while stuffing fries in his mouth at speed, partially just to continue to gross Hermes out.

"Really."

"I've never met him in person. Never even seen his face. I did ask him to send me a toy the same size as his cock, which he's not yet agreed or disagreed to do."

"Well that's the twink version of an engagement ring, isn't it?" Hermes didn't fully lean on Zagreus' table, because it was a crooked card table that would pitch right over if you set anything Hermes-sized on it. He did a good approximation of it, except for the wings on his head clearly working to keep him aloft. "Besides, you're about to see his face, aren't you?"

"How would you...?" Zagreus certainly hadn't had time to mention as much to Hermes.

"Messenger god, remember?" Hermes said, and then laughed. "No, not really—your phone's sitting right here and he's just texted you. Look."

Achilles (8:06 P.M.) *Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.*

"Eugh, gods, don't smile all dopey like that about a mortal," Hermes grumbled.

"Listen, I can be excited about having a date," Zagreus said, polishing off the rest of the fries and balling up the trash from his dinner, tossing it successfully into his trash can. Not much of an accomplishment, the trash can was only a few feet away. "That's what all of this is about, me being up here, living the human experience. This is part of it."

"Yeah, well, you might wanna back off on your human experience if you know what's good for you," Hermes said.

"Why, because my father's going to start sending people up here to kill me before natural causes can do it properly?" Zagreus asked, rolling his eyes.

"Yes, I'm aware. Got first-hand experience, there." He gestured to his face, which was no longer bleeding, but Hermes had seen that.

Hermes folded his arms, his wings still fluttering. "That's part of it. Your father thinks that you being on the surface is dangerous. I don't doubt someone'd be willing to mess with your little mortal boy-toy, either."

"Father wouldn't do that. Messing with the natural order of mortal life and death? It'd cause so much paperwork for him, he'd give himself headaches for weeks," Zagreus said.

"There's more at work here than just your father."

Zagreus dropped into the folding chair next to the table Hermes was not-sitting on. It creaked a little ominously. "Listen. Father's only like this because he knows I'm close to finding her."

"You're not entirely wrong about that, boss. But please, just listen to me for once." Hermes floated a little higher in the air as if to prove his point by way of intimidation via height.

"I am listening, Hermes," said Zagreus, who was texting Achilles back, actually.

Hermes, who had noticed this, just sighed. "Never mind it. I'll catch you later, coz. Just maybe have a think about what I said, yes?"

"Sure, Hermes," Zagreus said, nearly missing the bright flash as Hermes disappeared through his door.

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Every time Zagreus arrived in the mortal world, he had to remember to check the time. It was impossible to do so in the Underworld, so he also had to calculate how many days—weeks, even, at times—had passed since he'd last gone back down the Styx.

Most mortals Zagreus met became frustrated by his seemingly random disappearances for several days' time (particularly when it meant he missed

paying rent), but Achilles didn't seem to mind if Zagreus was particularly bad about getting back to him. Achilles was the same way; sometimes Zagreus wouldn't even hear from him for a full stint on the surface. He doubted Achilles had to worry about missing any sort of payments, though, other people handled that on his behalf.

This most recent escape attempt had taken two Surface Days, which Zagreus supposed were just 'days' to normal people. It meant, thankfully, he hadn't missed the time he'd scheduled after Achilles texted him without any additional context, asking if he'd like to meet up. He'd actually arrived twenty-two hours ahead of Friday at eight-thirty, which meant he spent almost a full day just waiting to meet Achilles and wondering what would happen.

At Hermes' behest, he'd been very good and had not gone out of doors aside from date-related activities and so most of his time was spent trying to figure out more things about the internet.

This only entertained him for so long, and he was also quite concerned about being late to meet Achilles, which meant he showed up at the park they planned to meet at half an hour early and was left anxiously trying to work through the nervous energy he'd built up all day thinking about this date. It was a date, right? Gods, if he went down that line of self-doubt he'd probably give himself an aneurysm. And then he'd be washing Styx water out of his hair and Achilles would be thinking he'd been stood up.

At least he was outdoors, which meant he could pace around. This was the nice sort of public park where somebody would report you to the authorities if you looked a little too crazy (Zagreus spoke from experience) but he had no blood at all on him this time, so he supposed he just looked like a nervous young man waiting on a blind date to arrive.

Eventually, he sank back onto a park bench, trying to relax and look at the scenery, maybe enjoy the sunset a little. Sure, his foot was bouncing out of control, but it was a bit less questionable than pacing.

He not-so-sneakily observed all the surrounding people and wondered if any of them were Achilles—unfortunately the current occupants were a

group of moms with kids, an extremely old man who was probably not Achilles, and a guy who was holding hands with a woman and was therefore probably also not Zagreus' date. There was a man jogging who looked single enough and the right age, but Achilles was probably not casually going for a jog prior to a date.

Then, Zagreus was suitably distracted because a woman walked by with the fluffiest, tiniest dog he'd ever seen and Zagreus gleefully asked to pet it. Surface dogs were strange in that they only had one head, but at least that meant Zagreus did not have to guess at which head they liked to be petted on.

The woman told him the dog was named Peanut Butter. Zagreus was goddamn delighted.

He was still crouched on the ground, telling Peanut Butter he was a very good boy (but not the best boy, that was reserved for his dear Cerberus) when he heard the soft clearing of a throat behind him and, "*Zagreus?*" in a voice he'd recognize anywhere.

He popped back up and almost slammed his head directly into Achilles' chin. "Oh! Yes, hi, I... oh."

Oh.

Achilles was...

Wow.

WOW, okay.

He was head and shoulders taller than Zagreus, which Zagreus was sort of used to, given the height of most people he knew. To be honest, he'd been sort of expecting that.

He had *not* been expecting Achilles to be this attractive.

Despite the summer heat that was still sticking around for the evening once again, Achilles was in a long-sleeve button-down, a pretty shade of sky-

blue, tailored enough to make the shape of his biceps and the taper of his waist very obvious. He didn't have a tie on, and his first few buttons were undone, leaving an enticing sliver of his chest visible beneath.

It was his eyes that were really drawing Zagreus in, though. Hooded and vibrantly green, the lines beneath them only serving to make him look handsomer. His hair was kept long, flowing around his shoulders, and his lips had this wicked little dent in the cupid's-bow that just made Zagreus want to *kiss him*.

This was the man Zagreus had spent probably several hours of his life at this point masturbating to. This was the man Zagreus had been having sex with (albeit over the phone) for a solid two months. This was the man who had about two dozen pictures of Zagreus in various compromising positions, and a couple of videos to boot.

Oh, he had made such good choices.

"Are you... is everything alright?" Achilles asked him.

Fuuuuck, his voice was even better in person.

"I'm good." It was so damn breathy, Zag bet he sounded fucked-out already. "You're... oh, wow. You're so gorgeous. That's entirely unfair, you can't have the world's sexiest voice and also be beautiful."

"You've no need to give me compliments, lad, but I appreciate them regardless," Achilles said.

"I absolutely do need to give you compliments," Zagreus argued, leaning in just a little, and determining that Achilles was even more beautiful the closer he got.

"Thank you, then." Achilles took his hands out of his pockets and then put them back, as if he wasn't certain what to do with them. "You... you look even lovelier in person, I'm afraid I don't quite know how to react."

"You're telling me! You were at least a little prepared!" Zagreus laughed. "Alright, well, let's go to this bar, then, before I jump you right here."

"Oh, yes, it's not far, but the front entrance is hard to find, so that's why I suggested we meet here—I, oh—" Achilles startled as Zagreus snatched his hand before he managed to put it in his pocket again.

"Is this alright?"

"Yes, of course. I just..." Achilles sighed, running his free hand through his hair, ruffling it a little at his temple. "I can't tell you how long it's been since I've gone on a date. I'm afraid I'm going to be insufferably awkward this entire time." He said it as if he was reaching for a joke but was a little too honest in his self-deprecation to make it there.

Zagreus, however, had no idea how courtship worked for mortals and would have found most everything Achilles did at least a little odd, comparative to his prior experience. "That's fine," he said, "your face is pretty enough to make up for it."

Achilles sounded like he was actually joking when he said, "oh, I don't know if I'm that pretty."

Zagreus, completely sincere, responded, "you most certainly are."

The hostess at the bar, which also seemed to function as a restaurant, recognized Achilles, or at least recognized his name, and took them through the crowded dining area without making them wait on a table. In the back, there was a patio surrounded by hedges, with a wooden trellis over-top, full of climbing vines. The effect made it seem like it was surrounded in greenery, although past the hedges there was just an alleyway and the next building.

"Tell me, what do people these days talk about on a first date?" Achilles asked him, once they were seated in a cozy corner on the bar's outdoor patio.

Zagreus, who had been attempting to fit his feet between Achilles', answered firstly with a shrug. "I don't know," he said, "I don't think I've ever properly been on a 'first date'." What he and Meg did probably did not qualify as dating. "We can talk about anything you like, honestly."

"Can we talk about how you're attempting to play footsie with me right now?" Achilles grinned, and it looked downright angelic in the low light from the hanging bulbs strung across the trellises.

"I'm doing nothing of the sort," said Zagreus, who was. He did have to pause when the waitress arrived and Zagreus realized he had not looked at the menu, which was mostly incomprehensible anyway because Father was no fun and any of the wine in the House was off-limits. If only he listened to Dionysus rant about varietals more. Cocktails were entirely beyond him.

Achilles saved him with a suggestion that Zagreus liked, even though he had no idea what was in it. There were leaves of some kind floating in it, which Zagreus was not great at distinguishing, given his lack of experience with plant life. The lemon slices, he could identify, though. It was sweet, and it warmed his throat and loosened his nerves enough that he didn't second-guess himself before getting out of his chair and joining Achilles on the bench-seat on the other side of the table.

From the way Achilles put his arm around Zagreus, he didn't seem to mind, either.

Neither bothered with a second drink, more interested in the conversation than anything. Zagreus told Achilles about his family, carefully obscuring details that were beyond normal mortal life, and Achilles mentioned his own family and was surprised when Zagreus did not recognize his mother's name. Apparently she was a well-known actress. Zag really hadn't had time to learn much of anything about popular culture, but Achilles just said he appreciated the fact that Zagreus wouldn't have anybody to compare him to.

It was much more fun than the time Hermes took him to a bar. That place had been loud, crowded, and the lights gave Zagreus a headache. He much preferred a quiet patio, tucked into a corner where he could lay his head on Achilles' chest and feel him speak as much as hear him.

Achilles mentioned having found the place because it was just around the corner from his home. Which meant they were just around the corner from Achilles' bed. Zagreus wished that corner did not exist. Hermes joked about not putting out on the first date, but Hermes also had not met Achilles. Besides, Zagreus, based on what he assumed the definition of 'putting out' was, had done so already. Several times. Over several phone calls.

When Achilles leaned in to kiss him, his fingers curled beneath Zagreus' chin to tilt his face up, Zag realized it might not be as difficult as previously assumed to convince Achilles to invite him home. Another kiss, slowly deepening it, his hands on Achilles' chest. A little insinuation and a nip of his lower lip. A breathy mention that he'd like to see Achilles' place. Particularly his bedroom.

Achilles got the check.

— — —

Achilles' home was an older townhouse with a character-filled exterior, which had been completely gutted and renovated at some point before he'd moved in. He told Zagreus as much on the way over—Zagreus would not have otherwise noticed, not having a mind for mortal architecture. The interior was simple and kept very neat, with soft warm lights that came on dimmed without Achilles hitting a switch as they walked through the door. This meant Achilles had his hands free to grasp Zagreus' waist, pulling him in and kissing him right there in the foyer, the kind of passionate, lust-fueled lip-lock that would have been inappropriate in public.

So, as it turned out, Achilles wasn't just a hot man with a sexy voice, he was a hot man with a sexy voice and a damn *talented* tongue, and big hands that settled perfectly into the small of Zagreus' back. He also had firm thighs and enough height on Zagreus to pull Zagreus into straddling one of them, Zagreus up on his toes to keep kissing Achilles.

Mortals had interesting fashion choices, and right now Zagreus was extremely irritated with the fashion choice of jeans, which were very uncomfortable to maintain an erection in. A chiton would be so much easier to strip off, too.

Gods, he wanted to do more with his mouth than just kiss Achilles.

He pulled away, panting into Achilles' mouth. "*Oh*, Achilles, sir, let me suck your cock."

"We're barely through the front door, lad, slow down." Achilles still punctuated it with another kiss, his hands slipping down to squeeze his ass and then back up, underneath his T-shirt this time, bare hands against Zagreus' bare skin.

And then, Achilles pulled away and just looked at him for a long moment. Zagreus searched his eyes, wondering what he was seeing, and then his attention was drawn to the curve of Achilles' lips as he smiled.

"What is it?" Zagreus asked him.

"Nothing. Kiss me again."

Zagreus yanked at Achilles' shirt, tugging it untucked, then pulled back, dropping off his tiptoes to take some strain off his calves. He still pressed forward, Achilles' thigh between his legs nearly making his eyes cross.

"Come, lad," Achilles said, and he nearly did. "Let's go to my bedroom."

Exactly what Zagreus had been hoping to hear.

"Oh, yes," he said, turning and walking further into the house, trying to guess which direction would lead him to Achilles' bedroom. The challenge was that there were a lot of rooms in here, even a little lofted area at the top of the staircase.

"Left, up the stairs," Achilles directed him.

Zagreus considered taking off his shirt while he walked but decided he'd be in danger of falling on his face, so he decided it was best to wait. He passed across the loft, which was lined in floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and then through the door into Achilles' bedroom. There was no motion-activated lighting here, but the entire left wall of the room was occupied by a massive window, which allowed enough light for Zagreus to see.

He tugged his shirt off, shaking out his hair after. That probably didn't neaten it any.

Achilles followed him in, switched on the lights (dimmer than they'd been in the living room, almost like candlelight) and for a second, he just *looked* at Zagreus. Unfortunately, Zagreus didn't know him well enough to be able to distinguish whether that facial expression was ogling or hesitating.

"Are you sure about this?" Zagreus asked, reaching out to gently touch Achilles' arm. He took a seat at the edge of the bed, feeling incongruous in the immaculate white bedding.

"I am." Achilles joined his side, sitting close enough that their thighs pressed flush. He didn't seem to mind when Zagreus ran his fingertip down Achilles' chest to part the front of his shirt, undoing one more button. "I must confess, it's been a long time since I've been with anybody."

"What's 'a long time' for you?" Zagreus asked. He'd gone centuries without having sex sometimes (and was duly frustrated by it) and so he was certain Achilles couldn't possibly have that beaten.

He chuckled, shifting to allow Zagreus to more easily undo his buttons. "Two years," he said. "And it was only the once, two years ago. Before that... my wife and I didn't really have that sort of a relationship. We cared for one another deeply, but both of us cared more about our work than our romance, and we scarcely even had time for that."

"Mm." Zagreus didn't have much to say because he was distracted taking note of the fact that Achilles was just as toned as the cut of his shirt made him look. "I mean, you have technically had sex with me on several occasions."

"Well. I suppose."

"What are you paying me for, otherwise?" Zagreus meant for it to come out like a joke, but it seemed to sour Achilles.

"Zagreus, if you truly don't want—I don't want you to think you have to do this because I won't support you if you decide not to sleep with me."

Zagreus' hand tightened in the fabric of Achilles' shirt. "No! I mean, I seriously didn't even think of that. You're gorgeous and I'd count myself lucky to be with you no matter what our relationship was."

Achilles sighed, and it sounded like relief. He kissed Zagreus, and it tasted even more so. He pulled back after only a moment, telling Zagreus, "Be all that as it may, I still haven't touched someone this way in years."

"Oh, that's alright, sir," Zagreus said, fluttering his lashes, knowing the flirtatiousness was overdone but it made Achilles laugh. "I'll take it easy on you," he said.

Achilles' breath caught.

Interesting.

Zagreus then swung himself into Achilles' lap, stripping Achilles' shirt down his shoulders. He'd said he'd go easy, not that he'd go slow. Achilles pulled his wrists out of his sleeves and set his hands on Zagreus' waist, tipping his head back so that Zagreus could dominate the kiss. Oh, letting Achilles bend him back and use his height to his advantage may have been nice, but being the one on top was even better.

He sank his hands into Achilles' hair and gripped tight, but didn't pull. Achilles seemed to like it, pressing more insistently into his kiss, hands slipping from his waist down to his hips, tucking into the back pockets of his jeans for just a second before reaching up to curl in his waistband. Yeah, that's what Zagreus had been waiting for.

He rolled into it slow, breaking the kiss and making Achilles look at his body as he ground down against him.

"Haaah, don't do that again until I take my belt off," Achilles noted, which, oops. Zagreus forgot that mortals actually wore those on pants rather than

higher up at their waists. Thankfully he hadn't employed too much pressure.

Achilles nudged Zagreus back, but he did it with one hand on Zagreus' crotch. It was as if he'd reached for his thigh and missed, but he didn't draw his hand away like it was accidental. In fact, he kept his palm there, rubbing through Zagreus' jeans.

His belt clattered against the nightstand and thumped as it hit the floor, and Zagreus fumbled open his fly, internally cursing the ridiculous mortal invention of zippers.

For a moment, they touched each other in the same way, groping like adolescents and kissing through it. Zagreus was a layer deeper, his hand shoved into Achilles' pants, and so he was able to more distinctly feel the shape of Achilles' cock in his underwear.

Blood and darkness, he wanted that in him.

“Achilles.” Another quick kiss, and then, “I want you to fuck me. Want you to wreck me. *Please*, sir.”

Was that a good shudder or a bad one? Gods, what Zagreus wouldn't give to get to know this man's face better.

“On your knees for me, then, if you like?”

Good shudder, then.

Zagreus obeyed, slipping off the foot of the bed and onto the fluffy white rug beneath. It was possibly the most comfortable place Zagreus had ever given somebody a blowjob.

He helped Achilles out of his pants eagerly, letting them go the way of the rest of his clothes—somewhere on the bedroom floor to find later. Perched on the edge of the bed like this, Achilles looked like a sculpture carved by the finest hand, his skin and his hair turned the same marble white-gold in the low bedroom lighting. No sculptor could ever achieve the intricate fall

of his hair over his shoulders, or the delicateness of his blond lashes, or the shine of wetness on his lower lip.

Aphrodite had been looking out for Zagreus, then, when he made an ill-conceived venture to get himself a sugar daddy.

“May I?” Zagreus asked, one hand smoothing up Achilles’ inner thigh.

“Please do.”

Zagreus somehow expected sex with a mortal to be different. Achilles was warmer, that was certain. Of course, that was also expected, given that Zag’s usual sexual partners consisted of a fury, a handful of miscellaneous shades and Death Incarnate, the once. Almost.

It was not altogether different, though. The sound Achilles made when Zagreus swallowed his cock was to be expected.

“You are not going easy on me,” he said, his hand clutching at the back of Zagreus’ head.

Zagreus almost laughed, turned it into a hum, and Achilles cried out again. The sound was more distant, as if he’d thrown his head back. Zagreus had closed his eyes—if he looked at Achilles, he’d get too riled.

“Zagreus!”

He pulled back, sucking hard enough that Achilles’ next repetition of his name came out mangled.

“Lad, I need you to—if you don’t stop, I’ll come.”

He was half-tempted to keep going, to make Achilles come down his throat, but there was also the part where *oh gods he wanted to get fucked so bad*. So, he eased up, but not without licking the full length of Achilles’ cock a couple of times.

“All right then, sir,” he said, rising from his knees and then insinuating himself back into Achilles’ lap. “How would you like to have me?”

Achilles had him on his knees again, on the bed this time, with Achilles' long hair tickling Zagreus' back while he bent him over and opened him up on deft, slim fingers. Zagreus rocked back on them, setting his stance wider to get Achilles' fingers deeper.

"Please, I'm ready, just—"

"Another moment, lad."

Of course, he very well couldn't tell Achilles he was sturdier than a mortal man, so he let Achilles play at readying him longer, enjoying the gentle brushes of Achilles' lips against his back.

"Are you ready for me?" he asked a moment later, unnecessarily.

"Now, now, come on!"

"Hah, hold on. Be patient with me." He said this because he was fumbling with the condom, trying to open it with hands already slick with lube. This was also something Zagreus did not need, but he kept quiet and let Achilles work it open.

Mostly quiet.

"Stop laughing," Achilles said, but there was a smile in it. He swatted Zagreus' ass for his troublesomeness, which of course was a fantastic reward as far as Zagreus was concerned.

"I'll stop laughing when you put it i—in—ngh!"

He pushed in until his hips were flush against Zagreus' ass, breath hot on the back of Zagreus' neck. He was still, there, for a moment. His hands on Zagreus' hips shook.

"It's alright, sir, you can move."

His hand went for Zagreus' then, laying over it on the mattress. "I'm sorry, lad, I need a moment."

Oh, so this was not out of concern for Zagreus, then.

Zag lowered his head, tugging one of Achilles' pillows closer with his free hand and clutching it to his chest. It made the arch of his spine more pronounced, he knew, more alluring. Achilles rocked forward into him like he couldn't resist. Zagreus counted this a success.

On Achilles' next thrust, Zagreus canted his hips backward, meeting him in it, forcing it faster, deeper.

"You can't—Zagreus, I'll come."

"You'll have to hold me down, then," Zagreus said.

Achilles huffed out another throaty groan, and then, to Zagreus' surprise, did as he suggested. He planted his hand in between Zagreus' shoulder blades, holding him there, his other grasping Zag's hip even tighter.

He fucked into Zagreus harder, angling his hips to a degree that made Zagreus *sing*.

"Right *there*, sir! Keep doing that and I'll—oh, fuuuck."

"God—fuck! The way you sound!"

Achilles' thrusts grew more erratic, and Zagreus grinned into the pillow. He dug his fingers into the pillowcase until it furrowed. Achilles was close.

"More, please, just keep talking to me—"

"Yes—Zagreus—the way you feel, you're so good. You take it so well."

The praise thrilled him, made his thighs shake. It was all he could do to keep his hips propped up, to keep Achilles from fucking him straight into the bed. "Sir, please come in me," he begged, breathy and half out of his mind.

"God, I—"

He turned his head, grinning over his shoulder. “My name’s Zagreus, actually.”

He couldn’t resist the private joke, although Achilles was too far gone to see the humor in it. He drove his cock as deep into Zagreus as he could when he came, bowing over him so that his curls piled onto Zagreus’ back again.

Achilles breathed hard after he finished, taking a swift moment to pull free of him, before collapsing more fully against Zagreus’ back. His grip on Zag’s hip was the only thing that kept Zagreus from becoming a heap on the sheets, a good thing, because it allowed Achilles’ other hand space to wrap around his cock and stroke him off.

It took approximately four seconds.

Achilles gathered Zagreus close to his chest afterward, kissing his neck and his shoulder, treating him all kinds of gentle.

“Damn, that was good,” Zag said, and then, “I’m sorry about your sheets.”

“Hm? Oh, don’t worry.” Achilles only kissed him again. “I’ll get you cleaned up.”

He made good on this, although he was a little awkward while doing it, as if he worried Zagreus would not want to be touched after the act. Zagreus tried to prove this was nothing to be concerned about, responding to Achilles’ touches happily and chasing after him with kisses when he tried to draw away. It was enough to tempt Achilles into climbing back in bed with him, still a little more tense than one should have been after the fact, but slowly relaxing if only because he seemed truly exhausted.

It had been far too long, really, since Zagreus had spent any time enjoying an afterglow, given how little he cared for lying around in bed. But it’d look strange, he thought, if he just didn’t sleep, and Achilles’ slow breaths—in and out, just under where Zagreus’ head lay on his chest—were enough to have him drifting off whether or not he’d planned to.

He'd have to be careful, he reminded himself as he slowly began to fall asleep. He could not survive long on the surface, and Achilles would be no doubt horrified to wake to find his lover vanishing into the Styx.

But it couldn't hurt to relax for a little while.

3. Death & the Fury

Summary for the Chapter:

The morning after, Zagreus gets some warnings, Zagreus does not heed those warnings even for a second.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello hello welcome to the Stuff Gets Weird for Achilles chapter!

Warning for Zag bleeding a lot in this one and some panic over that (he's fine, he's Zag, but Achilles doesn't know that)

Achilles was about as used to waking up beside someone as he was to going to bed beside someone—which is to say, not at all. While wouldn't have pegged Zagreus as the type to leave in the middle of the night, he woke up surprised to find his bed occupied simply because of the novelty of it.

Zagreus was not only still in his bed, he was still *close*, and Achilles was baffled by this more than anything. He thought he'd never again be able to sleep with someone touching him, but he was perfectly comfortable with Zagreus' head on his chest and one arm flung out across him, his tucked up beneath his body in a way that must have been uncomfortable. He was fast asleep despite it, and would probably wake up with that arm completely numb.

In the sunrise-pink light from Achilles' east-facing bedroom windows, Zagreus' lashes looked even longer and darker than they had last night, framing his face in a way that was strangely delicate. Achilles could hardly see past the slope of his nose, but he could feel Zagreus' breath against his bare skin, warm just like the rest of him. The lad was a *furnace*. Even his feet, tangled up in Achilles' under the bedcovers, were hot. If not for the cool whirl of the air conditioner, Achilles would have woken up sweating.

Achilles had woken almost exactly five minutes before his alarm was set to go off, and he fumbled to reset it so that it wouldn't wake Zagreus. From

here, he simply had to go about the task of determining how to extricate himself from beneath Zagreus without disturbing him. Achilles wouldn't subject Zagreus to his ridiculously early mornings if he did not have to.

This, it seemed, was impossible, as Zagreus stirred as soon as Achilles started moving. He lifted his head and blinked slowly, as if remembering where he was. In this light, his brown eye looked almost burgundy. He was lovelier than he'd ever been.

"Good morning," Achilles said, because the other option was 'you're beautiful', and that was just a bit too honest for six A.M.

"Hi." Zagreus pushed off of him to stretch, shaking out the arm that had been folded up beneath him. "Wow, I don't normally sleep that long." He arched his spine, making his back pop, and Achilles became very aware of how naked Zagreus still was. How naked they both were.

"I'm afraid I don't have much time before I have to leave for work," Achilles said.

"Enough time for breakfast?" Zagreus ran a hand through his hair which only served to make it stick up even more.

"Now, that's more an issue of a lack of anything in my kitchen. I apologize, I wasn't quite prepared for a guest."

Achilles sat up, which only gave Zagreus room to loop his arms around his waist. "A shower, then."

"I don't think we'll have time for *that*."

"Not like that! I promise not to make any advances on you in there. Your shower's big enough to fit two people—maybe three, honestly—without even touching."

He'd never really considered how many people he could fit in his shower,. "I suppose we could," he said, still half-convinced this was going to be a very bad idea.

Zagreus did not entirely make good on his promise not to make advances, although he *claimed* the noises he made were involuntary responses to having hot water that functioned properly and decent water pressure for the first time in his life. If that were the case, Achilles would have been the one making advances, but Zagreus was clearly provoking him, so Achilles could not be blamed.

Things didn't go very far, but even just kissing Zagreus under the spray, both of them tasting like Achilles' toothpaste, was enough to leave Achilles dazed as he struggled to remember his regular morning routine.

He didn't have much in his kitchen for breakfast but he did have coffee, which Zagreus took with a good deal of cream and sugar and still called a little too bitter.

He looked as lovely in Achilles' kitchen as he did in Achilles' bedsheets, a shock of dark hair and bright eyes and *movement* against the stillness of Achilles' quiet, neutral home. He sat at the breakfast bar rotating Achilles' French press in his hands and wondering aloud how it worked, wearing last night's black T-shirt and boxers. It made Achilles think of the conversation he was supposed to have with Zagreus instead of sleeping with him. Gauging whether things could go further. With Zagreus chattering away in his kitchen, smelling like Achilles' soap and drinking his coffee, it very nearly felt as if things already had.

"And what exactly are you looking at me like that for, Achilles?" Zagreus asked, holding his mug with both hands, thumbs tracing the pattern carved into the surface of the heavy ceramic. "Everything alright?"

"I'm fine." Achilles stepped around the counter to sit next to him. "Better than fine, actually."

"Then tell me what you're thinking about and why it's making you frown like that."

Achilles stretched his neck, rubbing the side of it as if to soothe himself. "Nothing of consequence, lad. It's just, well, you're a good deal younger than me." That was only the first of a long list of things Achilles was

thinking about, but he didn't have time to detail them all and this was certainly not the occasion. The age difference was at least the simplest to explain.

Zagreus' nose wrinkled as he considered. "Am I?"

"Twelve years," Achilles said, taking another drink of his coffee so he didn't need to be responsible for speaking. Zagreus must have forgotten how old Achilles was—it had been a long time since the two of them were looking at one another on opposite ends of a dating profile. "It doesn't matter much, it's just... at my age most people are married, have families. It's what most of them want."

"Is it what you want?" Zagreus set his feet on the bottom rung of Achilles' chair. They were barstool-style, to allow one to sit at the counter and it also allowed Zagreus to encroach on Achilles' space like this. Achilles found he didn't mind.

"Sometimes. I don't know," he said, honestly. "Didn't work out well for me last time." Zagreus knew that much already, Achilles had mentioned Mia in one of his habitual moments of admitting more than he should.

"Then don't." Zagreus returned his feet to his own barstool, propping them up on a higher rung so that he could fold his arms atop his knees. "I'm not just saying this because I like you, and because I'd like to keep doing this. But there's more out there than what everyone else does—which I'm sure you know, it's the most basic advice in the world, I think. But there's... *even more* out there than everybody else thinks there is. The world is stranger than it seems, and all that considered, this really isn't that odd."

I like you, and I'd like to keep doing this. His advice itself may have been exactly what Achilles expected from somebody his age, and not very helpful to Achilles at all, but this admission stuck with him.

Achilles kissed Zagreus, quick and sweet, before picking up both their now-empty mugs and depositing them in the sink. "Let me drive you home, lad." He'd be a bit late to work, but hopefully a decade's worth of being on time made up for that.

"Sure, uh, any recollection of where you put my pants?"

"I honestly could not tell you."

— — —

Zagreus' neighborhood made Achilles anxious. The ease with which Zagreus gave Achilles his address and not a vague set of directions or the nearest cross street also made Achilles anxious. "You shouldn't do that," he told him, "somebody less decent than me could end up hurting you."

Zagreus only laughed, bright and unassuming. "No they couldn't."

Oh, to have the confidence that came with being twenty-four.

Zagreus called his apartment building a shithole, but Achilles only now realized he wasn't exaggerating much. No wonder the rent cost so little. Zagreus really ought to move somewhere nicer, Achilles would help, of course, but saying that felt like too much, too fast. For all their intimacy, they really had only just met.

Before he got out of Achilles' car, Zagreus leaned across the center console to kiss him, long and deep, like he was never going to be able to see Achilles again, even though they'd already planned another date on the way over. Achilles was too charmed not to spend a moment being drawn into it. When Zagreus drew away, Achilles leaned in, stealing one more kiss before he left.

As Achilles watched Zagreus head up the stairs and into the building, he wondered, not for the first time, where in the world this man came from and how, of all people, he'd managed to find *Achilles*.

— — —

Death was waiting for Zagreus when he closed his apartment door behind himself.

He fumbled his keys, dropped them and had to scoop them back up again. "Holy shit, Than," he said, setting them on the card table. "I wasn't

expecting you."

"Nobody ever is," said Thanatos, who could be very melodramatic but probably deserved to be, given his whole 'being the incarnation of death' thing.

"What brings you all the way over here?" Zagreus asked, kicking off his boots and dropping onto his bed (which was just a mattress on the floor, but hey, it had sheets and pillows, and Zagreus felt absolutely terrible and it was comfortable enough). "Oh, please tell me you're not here for the old lady downstairs, she's always so nice!"

"I'm here for you."

That was unusual. Thanatos never came for him when he died of 'natural causes' (which were about as unnatural as you could get, in Zagreus' opinion). It was always just the Styx, pulling him down after he'd had his day or two in the sun. He could even feel it now, sucking at his bones, choking his lungs. Thank the gods he'd held up long enough that he didn't start struggling with it in front of Achilles. He could keep himself up here for a while longer, if he tried very hard, but it made him look terribly ill and Achilles seemed like the type who would worry.

"And to what do I owe the special treatment?" he asked.

"Ugh. I should just go." Thanatos crossed his arms, looking especially irritated.

Something was bothering him. Something beyond Zagreus' cheekiness, which Thanatos dealt with on the daily and normally took in a little more stride. He was hovering in place, which he did not do unless he felt particularly uncomfortable, or was about to start a fight. Zagreus, being a rather unworthy opponent right now, would have to attribute it to the former.

"Than, seriously. What is it?"

Thanatos sighed, but continued anyway. "Your father—"

"If this is about him going crazy because I'm so close to finding Mother, you can spare me the warning, actually." It came out a little more acerbic than intended both because Zagreus was dying and because his relationship with Thanatos had been more volatile lately. "Hermes already told me."

"Your *father*," Thanatos repeated, "is about to send *Megaera* to the surface. Did Hermes mention that?"

"Oh." That was a little more immediately dangerous than his father's distant ire. He could beat Meg in a fight in an arena in Tartarus, but the surface added so many additional variables, Zagreus ran cold with fear. Or maybe that was just the waters of the Styx rising to wash him away. "That wasn't mentioned."

Thanatos hovered closer, reaching out to lay a hand on Zagreus' cheek. "Zagreus, what you're doing, it's... I just want you to be safe."

"Nothing... nothing I do is ever safe." He was starting to get so close to plunging into the River that his breath was coming in death rattles. "I'm doomed to die over and over. Deeply unsafe."

"I'm sorry," Thanatos said, and he must have been apologizing on the behalf of his sisters, because only the Fates could curse Zagreus like this. "I'm not entirely talking about, well, how Megaera is going to come kill you next time you get up here. I saw you with that mortal man."

Hot, crawling embarrassment momentarily pushed back the waters of the Styx. It was uncharacteristic of Zagreus to be flustered over a relationship like this, after all, he hadn't been this way when Thanatos found out about him and Meg. Maybe it was because Achilles was somebody Than didn't know. Maybe it was because he was a mortal. "He, uh. We're close." If Than had seen them in Achilles' car, there was no way Zagreus could deny anything, having had his tongue in the man's mouth. "We went out yesterday. So he was dropping me off." He couldn't manage longer sentences. His limbs started to feel numb.

"Zagreus, gods fooling around with mortals never goes well," Thanatos said, as if Zagreus did not already know this, as if Zagreus was not related

to Zeus. "It's happened to the Olympians time and again." His face twisted into an even deeper frown. "I take all their mortal lovers eventually."

"You know, if someone didn't know you—ow—that might sound like an innuendo." Laughter hurt.

It was worth it to make Thanatos blush, though. He flushed ichor-gold, like all the gods. Except for Zagreus, whose blood was red even when he wasn't disguised as a mortal. "It wasn't. An innuendo, that is," Thanatos said, glowering. "Listen, all I wanted to do was warn you. And I've done that. So I'll see you at the House. If you haven't already left to come up here again by the time I return, that is."

With that, he vanished, turning all the light in Zagreus' apartment green for just a second. Zagreus blinked, and then it was just the sunlight pushing through the grime and stains on the outside of the window. Weak, like Zagreus was now.

A cloud rolled over the sun, and with the light, Zagreus faded.

— — —

He pushed himself out of the Styx to find his father already grumbling at his very presence. Cerberus sat by Hades' side his tongues lolling out happily as he greeted Zagreus.

He barely had the time to stop and say hello (of course he would never deny the best boy his pets), swinging through the hall and clapping Orpheus on the shoulder on the way. The court musician noted with a rare and possibly accidental strum of his fingers over the lyre, that Zagreus seemed to be in a very good mood.

He was indeed in a good mood. And he was also in a hurry to get back up to the surface, because he had a second date.

— — —

Achilles was on his way back from dropping Zagreus off at his apartment after a second date—this time, Achilles had escorted Zagreus home with nothing but a chaste kiss, until Zagreus turned said chaste kiss into something that had lasted so long they'd only been separated when Zagreus' neighbor opened the front door from the other side and almost sent the two of them tumbling off the doorstep—when he heard the voice from the shadows.

"Who are you?"

"Excuse me?" Achilles replied, startled by the sudden question from someone he hadn't even *seen* a second ago.

"I said, who are you?" It was a woman's voice, low and raspy, so quiet he almost did not hear her the first time and no louder the second. She stepped out of the shadows, and Achilles was compelled to take a step away from her.

Her skin was so pale he nearly thought it was blue, and it made the bright pink of her lipstick and her fingernails look red as blood by comparison. She was dressed as if she was trying to be inconspicuous, a white tank top and black leggings, but her hair was pastel purple and fell to her waist even when pulled back into a ponytail. That alone would make her stand out.

The most unusual thing about her, though, was the way the air seemed to warp around her, particularly on her left side, as if the area surrounding her body was trapped in a heat mirage. Achilles blinked and looked at her again, but the strange distortion remained.

"I'm... sorry, I really must be going," he said, but as soon as he made to move, she stepped forward. That was all she did, didn't reach for him or otherwise attempt to stop him, but it was enough. He stood still.

"You don't want to tell me, fine. Who are you to Zagreus, then?"

That had him bristling a little more. "Why are you asking? I might have the same question for you."

She folded her arms, standing casually, but her weight was evenly distributed on her feet, and she looked like she might bolt after him if he turned and ran. "His father sent me."

Achilles knew enough to be certain that meant Zagreus didn't want to talk to this woman, then. "If you've been sent to collect him, you ought to get in contact with him yourself. If you can't, then I doubt he wants to hear from you."

She smirked, cold and dangerous. "You're right about that, I suppose. She took another step forward, and he stood his ground. She was tall, he realized, of a height with Achilles or even a bit taller. "Be careful when you next see him. Neither I, nor anyone in his father's employ want to hurt you."

"Is this a threat?" Achilles kept his voice even, so as not to escalate things. He knew plenty about combat, but all that was about choreographing it for film. He didn't know how he'd handle himself against this woman, who, although she could not be hiding a weapon anywhere, looked dangerous all on her own.

"It's a warning." She waited on no more back-and-forth before turning, heading back around the corner from which she'd appeared.

Achilles stepped forward to look around the corner, watch where she went, but the alley she'd turned into was empty. She must have gone into one of the doors, or else she'd started running and had turned another corner.

He texted Zagreus, asking if he'd made it home alright, but received no response. Unfortunately, that was the only normal thing about this entire situation.

— — —

When Zagreus next escaped the Underworld and made his way to his apartment, Thanatos was not hanging around ominously again. Granted, this may have just been a product of Thanatos not having a lot of free time to hang ominously around Zagreus' apartment, and not a sign that any threat had abated.

Zagreus was also relieved because he'd managed to arrive before Achilles was supposed to drop by and pick him up.

Achilles didn't have to pick Zagreus up, after all, the restaurant was closer to Achilles' place than his own, but Zagreus appreciated the thoughtfulness of it. It also meant that he wouldn't have to rely on public transport and therefore could spend much more time in anguish over what to wear. It wasn't as if Zagreus had a lot of mortal-appropriate clothing and his disguise didn't manifest clothing, just popped him back into whatever he'd last had on. He was running out of outfits. His usual T-shirt and jeans was plain but he liked the way it fit him, and as he hadn't quite figured out what was the proper level of ornamentation for a mortal man, it was safe enough.

He fixed his hair in the mirror one last time before stuffing his phone and his keys in his pocket and running out the door.

Megaera was waiting literally two steps from his door.

"Oh, gods."

"Zagreus. You really thought it would take long for me to find you?" She, too, was disguised as a mortal, but hers was a little less effective. Zagreus wondered if that was because Nyx liked him better, or because Meg had an enormous wing to try to hide, while Zagreus merely had an oddly-colored eye and some flames to mask.

"Well, I thought perhaps you'd wait until after I went on my date with a very attractive man." He had no weapons on him. She must have been armed. If he fainted left and then hauled ass down the stairs he might be able to get out of the building before her.

And then what?

"My orders are to take you out as quickly as possible."

Always orders, with her. With most people in the Underworld, come to think of it. "C'mon, Meg, please? I can stand Achilles up, he'll look all sad."

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you started fooling around with a mortal," she said, which was remarkably similar to what Thanatos had told him. Had the two of them been talking behind his back?

Alright, well, the time for the element of surprise was running out on him. Zagreus ducked left, but didn't get a chance to turn it into a feint, because Meg stabbed him quite neatly in the shoulder with a dagger she'd pulled seemingly out of nowhere. Zagreus yelped as she yanked it back out. *Augh*, that hurt worse than the whip.

"Missed your heart," she grumbled, pulling her arm back to strike again.

"Wait! Meg, please—I'll die of blood loss from this eventually, don't stab me again."

She stopped, examining her dagger, then the wound on his shoulder. His shirt was slowly soaking through with blood, dammit, why did he have to wear the white shirt? "I'm sorry, you *want* it to take longer?"

"Well, yes, I want to text Achilles and cancel on him." Hopefully he wasn't already on his way, Zagreus would hate to be such an inconvenience.

Meg rolled her eyes and let out a derisive breath through her teeth. "You're an idiot." She no longer had the dagger in hand, though, which was a good sign. "Break things off with that mortal for good, Zagreus, if you want him out of the line of fire."

"I fail to believe, *augh*, taking him out is a part of your orders," Zagreus huffed, sinking back against the door.

"Yeah, well, I'm not the only one looking for you. And not everyone's under your father's jurisdiction."

How exactly she managed to disappear through the tiny hallway window and fly off, Zagreus didn't get the chance to see. Didn't really want to lift his head.

Taking his phone out of his pocket was a struggle, because it required the use of his left arm, which was screaming with pain and doing a whole lot of bleeding. Perks of a shithole apartment, though, it was likely nobody would be too bothered by suspicious stains in the hallway carpet.

He was halfway through *I'm so sorry I couldn't tell you sooner but I have to cancel, something came up* when he heard the creak of someone coming up the narrow staircase and into his apartment building. Dammit.

He looked up, expecting it to be the nice lady from downstairs or the terribly loud neighbors who would have annoyed Zagreus if he actually slept, or maybe even someone miraculously appearing to fix the hot water in the shower.

It was none of these people.

It was Achilles.

— — —

Zagreus was not normally late.

In fact, the previous two times Achilles had met him, Zagreus was the first to arrive, even though Achilles had been early.

That was why, after a few minutes of sitting in his car on the curb outside Zagreus' building, Achilles went up to check on him. The building door was being propped open with a brick, likely to allow some of the heat to escape, although he wasn't sure how well it would actually work. Achilles had to pause to let one of Zagreus' neighbors pass, the tiny excuse for a lobby too cramped for any single person to go through at one time.

Zagreus lived upstairs, right? He swore he'd mentioned the staircase at some point. Achilles had no earthly idea what he was going to do, just start knocking on doors? But his feet were carrying him up the stairs anyhow, although he stopped short at the top of the staircase.

Zagreus was here. And Zagreus was proving that Achilles really need to convince him to move to a safer neighborhood.

"What happened?" Achilles asked, dropping to his knees beside Zagreus and trying to determine where the hell all the blood was coming from.

"Shit. You weren't supposed to—"

"Let me call an ambulance." He reached for his phone, hands shaking, god, couldn't he function better under pressure? Achilles as fine when *he* was the one injured; he'd barely made a fuss when he broke his ankle on set a few years back. He couldn't even tell how bad Zagreus' injury was, could hardly look at it before his eye made a squeamish revolt.

"No, please." Zagreus grabbed his wrist. "I... this won't make much sense, but I'm fine."

"You're not fine—"

"You can't take me to a hospital." Zagreus was insistent, his eyes focused on Achilles and his jaw set. He was even paler than usual, sweat at his temples from the shock and the pain.

"I have to."

Was this going to kill him?

"No."

"Zagreus, what is this *about*?"

"I'm..." He took a breath, leaning his head back. From what Achilles could see, the wound was at his shoulder, not his chest, although it had looked that way at first. "They won't be able to help." He closed his eyes. "I *know* it doesn't make sense."

He certainly was right about that. "I'm going to need a better reason than that." Who was the closest person he knew with medical experience? Achilles searched his mind, and did not like the answer he came up with.

"I... I have a friend who lives a few blocks from here—or, he did, last I heard—and he used to work in a hospital. I'm going to call him, and if he doesn't pick up I'm calling an ambulance."

"I really wish you wouldn't," Zagreus ground out, but he was looking even worse, his breathing getting more shallow, and Achilles had to do *something*.

Thankfully, he never deleted contacts in his phone, no matter how uncomfortable his relationships became.

The moment it took for the call to connect seemed like forever. Achilles wondered if he should take Zagreus' hand, just to comfort him or to feel for the pulse in his wrist. He settled his hand on Zagreus' knee instead, a point of contact to steady himself. The phone was still ringing. Achilles didn't entirely notice that he was holding his breath until his lungs started to hurt.

Halfway through the ring, there was a click. "*Achilles*." His voice was as even-toned as ever, and relief flooded Achilles' entire being just hearing him.

"Oh, thank god. I need your help, Patroclus."

4. the Miraculous & the Inexplicable

Summary for the Chapter:

Zag meets the most beautiful man in the world, learns that Achilles is in far more danger than they thought, and tries to fix it. Tries.

It took Zagreus a moment to work out where he was. He must have blacked out at some point while Achilles was moving him inside his apartment. He came to still sprawled on the carpet with a towel pressed to his shoulder where Meg had stabbed him, not quite enough pressure to staunch the bleeding, but Achilles was shaking too badly to have a very firm touch right now. Achilles was talking to someone over his shoulder, his normally soft voice peaking with panic.

Zagreus briefly wondered if his bloodstains would vanish when he died, like they must have done in the Underworld, given that he never came across any. Unless of course, Father had shades mopping up after him, which Zagreus doubted, because he'd never said as much. If he was making messes, Father would let him know he was a pain to clean up after. Zagreus had never actually *been killed* on the surface, had just died of natural causes every time, and the Styx was more of a concept than an actual river of blood up here.

If the blood stayed behind, he felt a bit bad for Achilles, whose hands and shirt were stained already. Zagreus' eyes slipped closed, and he could feel his breathing going just a little too shallow. He was familiar enough to know what this might mean.

"Get out of the way, you're not helping." This was the newcomer. On the phone, Achilles had called him Patroclus. Footsteps drew closer, and then he must have been kneeling beside Zagreus, replacing Achilles at his side. Dammit. *Dammit*. Now Zagreus was going to have *two* mortals watch him die and then vanish inexplicably. "Zagreus, yes? Can you hear me?" Patroclus had much steadier hands, peeling back the towel to inspect the damage and then immediately applying much more significant pressure. It hurt, but it'd stop the bleeding effectively.

"Yes. Hi. Unfortunate circumstances, under which we seem to be meeting. You can call me Zag."

"That's good. Can you open your eyes?"

Slowly, he did. And thank the gods he did, because this man was a *sight*.

"Oh, gods, you're gorgeous."

"Your boyfriend has good taste, Achilles," Patroclus muttered, not loud enough that Achilles, who was hovering somewhere in the distance, could hear him. "We need to get you to a hospital," he said, which was less intriguing.

"No."

"Yes. You're losing too much blood, you'll definitely need more."

Hah. Zag would like to see some mortal doctor try to identify what the hell his blood was. "I can't," he said, and then remembered—Hermes had dropped something off. 'A little frequent customer gift from Charon,' he'd called it, although Zagreus was certain Charon wasn't prone to giving out anything of the sort. "Achilles, there's a drink in my fridge, can you get it?"

He heard movement, which was hopefully a sign Achilles was listening.

"I don't care if you don't want to go, your life is in danger," Patroclus said, his brows lowered in concern.

"You know, I'm not normally into men with beards but that's a really good look on you." He really wasn't able to stop whatever nonsense was coming out of his mouth, was he? Usually the only people around while Zag was dying were wretches and shades, and he didn't have to worry about saying something embarrassingly stupid, except maybe around the furies. And those normally killed him quicker. He was starting to wish he'd just let Meg dispatch him.

"You're very sweet. I'm calling an ambulance," Patroclus was already looking around for a phone, or for Achilles.

"Wait! Just, let me—Achilles, where's—"

Achilles was at his other side now, handing him a Hydralite he'd have to thank Hermes a dozen times over for. He downed it in one, gasping as the healing took effect. It wouldn't fix things entirely, but he'd stop bleeding, which meant they would stop trying to take him to the hospital. Hopefully.

"Okay," he breathed. "Should be fine, now."

"There's no way drinking... whatever that was fixed you." Patroclus looked dubiously at the empty container Zagreus was still holding. Zag wasn't sure what he thought he'd find on there, it was labeled entirely in Greek. And probably not the same sort of Greek people wrote things in today.

Zagreus rolled his shoulder, still sore, some of the internal damage unrepaired, but it was good enough that, were he in the Underworld, he would've picked himself up and gone through the next chamber. "Take a look, it's relatively okay."

Patroclus pulled back the towel and examined the wound. Zagreus' skin was still torn a little, and it would need to be covered if he didn't want to get some amount of blood on everything, but it had clotted enough that it was no longer fatal. "What... what the *hell* was in that thing you drank?"

"I don't think it would work on mortals. Ugh." Zagreus sat up, his head still rushing because he was in the process of recovering from a good deal of blood loss.

"And whatever does that mean?" Patroclus asked.

"It means, I'm *fine*, is what it—" Zagreus began, struggling to get to his feet and then, for the second, even more embarrassing time that day, passing out again.

Should've asked Hermes for two Hydralites.

— — —

When Zagreus woke up the second time he was in a car. Then he fell asleep, not unconscious, and the third time he woke he was in a bedroom that did not belong to him, but, upon further inspection, was familiar.

He jolted, desperately worried he was getting blood all over Achilles' white duvet. As it turned out, his wound had been bandaged. He could feel a thick pad of gauze through the T-shirt he was wearing—not his own, this one was a dark forest green and impossibly soft and a little big on him. It smelled like Achilles, like bergamot and something woodsy. He'd been cleaned up, and could find no trace of blood on his skin, but he still felt annoyingly woozy.

Through the open bedroom door, he could hear conversation.

Well, if you could call it that. More like arguing, if arguing was done very softly so as not to wake the sleeping knife-wound victim in the next room.

"...And then I don't hear from you for upwards of two years, now, and then I get a call from you and it's *this*? What's going on with you, Achilles?"

"You did tell me to call you when I got my life together. Clearly, I have not."

"So why did you call me, then?"

"I... I don't know. I panicked. You were the only person I could think to call."

"Hm. Do you have any idea what happened to him?"

"Not a clue. I didn't think his neighborhood was that bad." As Achilles sighed extensively, Zagreus crept out of the bed, wondering when was best to announce that he'd woken up. Also, possibly wanting to eavesdrop just a tiny bit more because he could *hear* the history here and he was immensely curious.

"How long have you been seeing him?" Patroclus asked.

"What makes you think I'm seeing him?" Achilles sounded defensive, but there was a note of curiosity under it.

"He's your type."

"Whatever does that mean?"

"It means what I said. He's cute, though. You haven't changed, Achilles."

"Oh, shut it. Don't smile at me like that. *Pat.*" Achilles was almost whining—definitely some history. As prickly as he'd been throughout the whole of the conversation, he was comfortable with this man.

Alright, Zagreus would like to eat something soon and recover the rest of his health, so he nudged the door open, purposefully slowly. Of course, it did not creak. Achilles' place was too nice and too newly renovated for creaky doors. Zag was forced to clear his throat to announce his presence, instead.

"There he is," said Patroclus, who was sitting beside Achilles in the little lounge-slash-reading area at the top of the stairs. They were together on the two-person sofa instead of one of them being in the chair, although Achilles stood as soon as Zagreus made his presence known.

"You should still be resting," he said, setting a hand gently on Zagreus' arm because he didn't seem to understand that Zagreus was healed enough to weather a less delicate touch.

Zagreus was slowly coming to the sinking conclusion he'd been turning over in his mind ever since Achilles found him lying outside the door.

He was going to have to tell him.

And then he was going to have to not see him anymore.

His eyes were smarting just thinking about it, and he blinked rapidly to clear them of would-be tears, leaning heavily into Achilles to hide the hurt in his face against Achilles' chest, squeezing him tight enough to keep himself from trembling. If Meg wasn't already aware she hadn't managed to

off Zagreus, she'd find out soon, and she would be coming for him again and she would not miss this time. And sure, she may not have been ordered to take out any humans, but there was an acceptable amount of collateral damage Meg was willing to cause.

Zagreus didn't even like to think about the part where she'd said she wasn't the only one looking for him.

He cursed Meg for not letting him have just one last nice date with Achilles, cursed his father for sending her in the first place, cursed himself for the optimism that made him believe that seeing a mortal would be fine.

"I'm sorry for worrying you," he said, still muffled.

"There's no need to apologize," Achilles said, even though Zagreus was sure he was about to have to apologize a few dozen more times.

He leaned back, to look Achilles in the eye. "I'm going to explain some things, and it's all going to sound completely ridiculous, and you're going to think I'm insane. And I have little way to prove it other than the fact that I healed from that injury over the course of a few hours."

"Honestly, that's fairly solid proof of some sort of supernatural nonsense," Patroclus said, leaning casually on the arm of the couch.

"Perhaps it simply wasn't as bad as we first thought." Achilles ushered Zagreus over to sit and he took the armchair, sort of wishing he could have stayed close enough to touch Achilles.

Patroclus nudged Achilles with his foot. "That's your memory playing tricks on you. I know what I saw. That wound was bad, and there was enough blood on the scene that he would have been in bad shape even if we did manage to get him to a hospital. He shouldn't be alive right now, much less walking."

Achilles, too, was leaning on the arm of the couch, so that he was as far away from Patroclus as possible, though he did not seem to be doing this consciously. He had his face resting on his hand, so he was a bit muffled

when he said, "yes, well, you always were more inclined to believe in strange things."

"Patroclus is right, actually," Zagreus said. "I'm... not human."

"And... what exactly do you mean by that?" Achilles asked him.

"Aliens," Patroclus replied in a complete deadpan.

"No!" Zagreus yelped. "I'm from this planet!" This was getting more ridiculous by the second. He sank back into the armchair, tipping his head back. "I'm from the Underworld, not outer space."

"The underworld," Patroclus said slowly. "As in, the criminal underworld?"

"No, um, as in the literal Underworld."

"As in, where people go when they die," Patroclus confirmed.

Zag dug his toes into the plush rug beneath them. He was just wearing his socks; he'd either kicked off his shoes when he got inside or someone had removed them for him. "That is a thing that happens down there, yes."

"Are you dead, then?" Patroclus asked.

"This is impossible," Achilles noted. But his eyes were narrowed, he was focused on everything Zagreus said. He was not entirely unconvinced, hadn't yet tuned out of the conversation.

Zagreus shook his head. "I'm not a shade—a dead mortal's soul. There are other beings in the Underworld. Plenty of them. I was born there, but, well..." He worked the words over in his mind carefully before speaking, searching for a way in which he did not sound like a delinquent teenager. "I'm trying to escape."

"You seem to have succeeded," Patroclus said.

"You would think that, wouldn't you." Zagreus had to be careful about what he told them. They couldn't know enough that it would put them in danger

if anyone came looking for Zag. He couldn't tell them that he was the prince, that he was running from Hades, that he was a *god*, because the list of Chthonic gods was short enough that he could be picked out with relative ease. "I can't stay up here on the surface for very long. If I stay here long enough, I die. And then I go back down, and I have to escape again. If I don't die while I'm escaping, I pop out into a parking garage near my apartment."

Achilles' frown was deepening by the moment, making the lines around his mouth stand out. "And that's why you sometimes don't respond to me for several days, I suppose?"

"Yeah."

"Is that why you were bleeding out?" Patroclus asked. "You just start dying like that?"

"Oh, no, wow, that would be a mess if it happened every time. No, uh... someone's... not happy with me escaping. Not happy with what I might find up here. So, that someone—" *don't say Hades*, "—sent one of the Furies after me. And she stabbed me."

Achilles' eyes widened, and at first Zagreus thought he was fear-stricken by the idea of Zagreus being stabbed, even though he'd seen the results. Then, he asked, "what does this woman look like?" which was so much worse.

Oh no. No, no, Meg had already found him?

Zagreus knew she'd known *about* Achilles, but she'd actually *met him*? Zagreus was half-tempted to bolt right now. The longer he stayed here, the more danger Achilles was in. But panicking and leaving now would probably stress Achilles even more, and he might come after Zagreus if he didn't know how truly dangerous it was.

"Uh, she's tall. Purple hair, usually in a ponytail, and most of the time she'd got pink lipstick on. When I saw her she was disguised as a mortal, so no wing. She's taller than you are, and built like she could kick your ass. She wears a lot of earrings."

The way Achilles pursed his lips was enough for Zagreus to know he recognized Meg based on these details. *Blood and darkness*, this was bad. "I met a woman by that description. She asked me about you. There was something strange about her, the way the air around her looked."

Zagreus dropped his face into his hands. "I'm so sorry, Achilles, I didn't mean to get you involved in this, really. And also you, Patroclus, I mean, I don't even know you. No offense."

"That's just a statement of fact, of course you meant no offense."

Zagreus heaved a breath that sort of sounded like a sob, and made further attempts to curl up into a ball.

"Pat, do you mind...?"

"No, I'll be downstairs."

He heard footsteps retreating and then felt Achilles approach him, one hand on Zagreus' shoulder, his other reaching to gently pry Zag's hands away from his face. "It's going to be alright, lad. Whatever you've gotten yourself involved in, we can help. I can help."

Zagreus knew he looked awful—on the verge of tears, blotchy-faced and wet-eyed. Achilles still looked at him with terrible gentleness, stroking a thumb beneath his cheek even though no tears had yet fallen.

"I'm sorry, but... this isn't something anybody can help with. I know you don't fully believe me, but. Ugh." He paused, shook his head, then leaned forward, planting his forehead just below Achilles' sternum and allowing Achilles to stroke his hair and calm him. "I'm really going to miss you."

"Zagreus, must you talk as if this is the end of it all?" Achilles settled a hand on the back of his neck, toying with the hair at Zagreus' nape. "You're right. I don't understand, and I'm having trouble believing that what you say is entirely literal. But I want to help, I swear it."

"There's nothing you can help with now," Zagreus admitted, lifting his head to look Achilles in the eye, so as to memorize his profound confusion and newly-blossoming hurt, so that he might remind himself what happens when gods fooled around with mortals. "I'm sorry," he said again, for as much good as it did. "I'll try to get this sorted, and if you... well. I'll see."

"Zagreus, help me understand what's happening, here," he begged, exuding so much earnestness Zagreus nearly drowned in it.

Oh, Zagreus thought, I could have loved him. I might already.

"I can't."

I'm sorry.

5. the Impossible & the Insane

Summary for the Chapter:

Achilles is definitely not losing his mind, Thanatos is doing his best, Zagreus is still trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

I'm losing my mind, Achilles thought, not for the first time that week, not even for the first time that day.

He was staring at the ugly scar down the center of his front door, a series of puncture marks left behind after Achilles dug several ugly-looking serrated arrowheads out of the wood. He had kept the arrows, wrapping them up in a towel on the table in his study, in case he ever managed to convince himself he was not, in fact, losing his mind and that he ought to call the police.

Sometimes, Achilles had to look at the marks left behind by the strange happenings of his past two weeks, or he would convince himself he'd imagined it entirely. His mind did not enjoy reconciling things he could not explain with any sort of logic. And so, he often came to the conclusion that he'd finally worked himself into a mental breakdown.

One such occasion was the reason he was home.

"Take some time off work," the lead coordinator had told him. He had a colleague returning from maternity leave who could pick up his projects until he was ready. He overworked himself at the best of times. He had the better part of a decade's worth of unused leave piled up.

Unfortunately, taking some time off work meant he had much more time to obsess over all of this: Zagreus' inexplicable injury and even more inexplicable recovery, Zagreus' subsequent disappearance, the innate sense that someone was following him, the *half a dozen actual goddamn arrows shot through his front door*.

His car had been broken into three days ago. No windows shattered, no locks pried open, but Achilles had, as always, shut and locked the doors, so

finding one of them swinging open when he next entered his garage (which was also shut and locked and had also been left inexplicably open) sent him into the panic spiral which resulted in him taking some time off work. Of course, he should have called the authorities, but nothing was taken and nothing was damaged and once Achilles closed and locked all the doors, he had trouble believing they'd ever been opened in the first place.

When the same treatment had happened to his house while he was out trying to get some fresh air, the front door left unlocked and creaking open, he still had not called the police, but he had, in another truly spectacular moment of weakness, called Patroclus, who'd managed to talk him down.

And then there were the arrows in the door.

Achilles had photographed them from every possible angle, knew every detail from the perfectly-straight shafts (handmade, wooden, not industrially produced) to the white fletching tied on with golden thread, to the sharp, deadly arrowheads which would absolutely destroy a person if they were hit with one. He'd broken a few of them when he pulled them out of the door, but he kept all their composite pieces wrapped in the towel, which he occasionally opened to look at them, just to remind himself that this truly had happened.

Of course, the scars on the front door also served as evidence. They were all lined up vertically, one-two-three-four-five-six, in such a neat row Achilles swore if he took a level to it, they'd be perfectly even. The door was too solid for them to have penetrated—it wasn't an attempt to break in. It was a warning. *Look what I could do to you, if I wanted.* Just like the opened doors.

The first of the six puncture wounds was disturbingly level with Achilles' forehead.

The last, had this person been aiming for him and not for his front door, would have hit him low in the belly. Of course, he would not have been standing after the first.

He hadn't called Patroclus about this incident. Patroclus had quit his job as an EMT some years ago and did not need to handle emergency calls, least of all from Achilles. No. He'd called Zagreus. And then he'd texted Zagreus. And, although it had been several days, he'd heard nothing. He'd even gone so far as to drop by Zagreus' apartment, and found himself immensely disturbed when there was no blood on the hall carpet, as if Achilles had never found his lover half-dead right there.

He put his hand against the door, feeling where the paint started flaking up where the edge of one of the holes began. He'd done this before and had gotten a splinter stuck in his forefinger for his troubles.

Even as he looked at the marks, the back of his neck prickled with the skin-crawling feeling that somebody was watching him. He did not turn his head, but he did look as far to each side as he could see, and at the very edge of his periphery, on his right, there was a figure standing with their back flat against the wrought-iron gate that allowed access to Achilles' yard, just between the garage and the house.

They had not yet realized Achilles had noticed them. He had one chance for the element of surprise, and he hoped to god they weren't armed. If they were, he hoped it was whoever had shot the arrows into his door—basically useless in close combat.

Achilles let his hand drift down, settling at his side almost as if he was going to put it in his pocket. He took a step back, still facing the door, cocking his head like he was considering it, but actually attempting to give himself a better line of sight on the intruder. From here, he could tell it was not the woman he'd met before, who Zagreus called 'Meg.' It was a man, dressed entirely in black, wearing what appeared to be a long, hooded robe. And he was stepping closer with every second.

Achilles willfully untensed every muscle in his body to give the man the appearance of safety. And then, all at once, he launched himself over his porch-railing and lunged for the intruder.

"Why are you following me!" he shouted as he grasped a handful of black fabric, yanking the intruder forward and barely succeeding. Though the

man was not much larger than Achilles himself, he was disturbingly solid, as if Achilles had tugged on a statue.

And then he was gone.

There was a flash of green light and Achilles staggered backward, his balance thrown off. The man had vanished.

Oh god, oh god, he really was going crazy, wasn't he?

"I'm not following you." Another flash of green, and the man reappeared a few feet to Achilles' left. "I'm not the one who did that." He gestured at the door.

Achilles tried to memorize his appearance but his face was near-hidden beneath the hood of his robe. He had dark skin with a sort of grayish pallor, and a pair of bright eyes peered out from under the hood, but that was all Achilles could discern.

"Then who the hell are you?!"

"I'm trying to help you." He recoiled back as if he feared Achilles would lunge at him again. "You need to be more careful."

Achilles' voice took on a tinge of desperation. "What do you *mean*?"

"I mean, we're doing our best to keep you from being connected to Zagreus, but they're keeping too close an eye on him."

"I don't suppose you'll tell me who 'they' are?" He wanted to run, wanted to fight, even, but he was frozen in place, staring at this man and at the air around him, looking for some hint of distortion like the woman had around her. There was none.

His arms folded, and Achilles noticed that on his right hand he wore a gauntlet that looked like it had claws, with an eye fixed in the center that looked, from its current position, as if it watched Achilles.

"*They*," he explained, "are the gods."

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Zagreus was mid-way through Asphodel and sweating so badly he'd kill that abominable enormous floating gorgon head twice if it meant he'd come across a fountain chamber.

He paused for a moment, leaning heavily on a platform that occasionally held a Well, and remembered that the fun part about Asphodel was that even if he stopped for a break, he was no less horrendously sweaty for it.

Ugh.

And he complained about his apartment not having air-conditioning.

He was surprised to hear a familiar toll and catch a flash of green as Thanatos appeared, looking unaffected by the sweltering heat even though he must have been uncomfortable, there was a reason he only ever met Zag in Elysium. He brought a rush of cool air with him from wherever the hell he'd just been, and Zagreus leaned into it, his eyes nearly drifting closed as he savored the briefest moment of relief.

"There you are."

"Here I am," Zagreus agreed. "Took care of all the shades, no thanks to you, though."

"I was busy. Checking up on your mortal."

"Achilles?" Zagreus asked, as if Thanatos was referring to anybody else. Achilles wasn't 'his mortal', though. Father was going to make sure of that.

"It's not good, Zag." Thanatos lifted his cowl off his head, so that he could fix Zagreus with the full effect of his disappointed frown. "Half of Olympus is helping you, but the other half is tailing him. To get to you, I suppose. And they, unlike your father, will not stop at killing you alone."

'Half of Olympus' had to be an exaggeration, right? One mortal wouldn't require the attention of half a dozen gods.

"Achilles doesn't know anything, though," Zagreus said, something that felt very much like a stone sinking into the pit of him. Despite the heat of Asphodel, the panic this information induced sent ice down the length of his spine. "I specifically did not tell him who I am."

"It's not enough. He knows your name, he knows where you live, and he's close enough with you that they're convinced you're going to see him again. They want to find your mother as much as you do, Zag, that's the only reason they could be after you like this."

"I won't see him again. I broke things off." Zagreus balled his hands into fists, folding up his arms and looking down at his own feet, bright as Asphodel's magma.

"That doesn't matter. They have someone following him. I imagine Demeter's recruiting her sister, who's taken everybody whose loyalty she can curry. It's a lot of Olympus, Zag." Thanatos's frown deepened, making him look even wearier than usual. "I imagine it's even possible that some of the Olympians who have been lending you their strength have also been working with Demeter."

"What, you mean they're pulling a double agent thing? Who?" Zagreus ran through his mental list. Zeus and Poseidon were too proud to work with Demeter, but Artemis might go along if it meant spiting her father. Ares seemed genuinely loyal to Zagreus. Aphrodite was a complete chaos agent; it was likely nobody knew where her loyalties lay. Dionysus didn't seem to have double-dealing in him. Athena was noble, but also a master strategist. Because she had championed his cause to the Olympians, Zagreus had to doubt that she would turn on him, but maybe there was more at work than he knew.

"I don't know," Thanatos said.

Zagreus scrubbed his hand through his hair and managed to smear soot all over his forehead. Who was he forgetting? Oh. Hermes also might want to spite his father. But Zagreus doubted that meant he'd side with Demeter and Hera.

"Than, I really am worried about Achilles. You may think it's silly, but I care for him."

"It *is* silly." Thanatos folded his arms. "But it's impossible to stop you once you've become attached to somebody. I know that now." He spoke, perhaps, of Zagreus' incessant need to find Persephone. "But if you keep going to the surface, you're only going to be putting him in more danger."

"Apparently, I'll be putting him in more danger even if I'm not!" He hadn't made it up in his past few attempts. He was off his game. It wasn't hard to work out why.

"I wanted to ask you to suggest something to him, although now I fear it may be too late." Thanatos stopped hovering, put himself closer to Zagreus' level. "The reason Persephone has never been found is that there are places on the surface that are, as the Underworld is, enshrouded by Nyx's darkness. I know of one such place—it is a home where your mother used to live, not too far from where you live when you spend time in mortal civilization, but remote enough to be safer. We could bring him there, while we sort things."

Zagreus folded his hands, interlocking his fingers. "Achilles won't like to be pulled away from his work," he said. "But we have to keep him safe."

Thanatos nodded, something in the set of his face telling Zagreus he was trying not to grimace. "I'll do what I can. But Zagreus, it's not a permanent solution."

"You don't need to tell me that."

Thanatos drew something out of a fold in his robe and pressed it into Zagreus' hands. It was something Zagreus recognized from their childhood—a stuffed toy that looked like a much cuter version of the vermin Zagreus fought in the Temple. "When you get up to the surface, use him to call me, and I'll take you there, too."

Zagreus' eyes widened as he looked up at Thanatos. "Wait, you're giving me Mort?"

"I'm letting you *borrow* Mort," Than corrected him. "Don't you dare lose him."

"I would never!" Zagreus safely stowed away the Companion, knowing he'd pull it out several times just to reassure himself it was there.

All Thanatos said before vanishing again was, "good."

6. the Escape & the Archer

Summary for the Chapter:

Achilles fears he's overreacting, Patroclus tries to put those fears to rest. Divine assassins pay them a visit.

Notes for the Chapter:

PAT POV TIME!!!!

"You should... perhaps you should just go. I overreacted."

"If anything," said Patroclus, looking at the collection of broken arrows, "I think you underreacted."

Achilles was unusually frazzled. He'd always been an emotional person who felt things on a greater scale than most people, but he was normally good at focusing while under pressure and either fixing the problem or bull-headedly putting it out of his mind until it went away.

That was the issue with this problem, Patroclus decided. Existential crises could only be fixed by time and acceptance, and Achilles did not like that option.

He was pacing back and forth in the study, occasionally glancing at the offending weapons collected on his coffee table. Patroclus thought about shoving them into the antique desk and closing the fold-up lid so that Achilles would stop focusing on them. Out of sight, and maybe out of mind. Achilles was held in too much tension, he might snap if Patroclus touched them.

"You haven't been sleeping, have you?" Patroclus asked. Achilles did not manifest this in ways most people did, with sluggishness and tired eyes. Instead, he became intense and alert, as if his body compensated for exhaustion by making him terrifyingly vigilant. Even as Patroclus said this,

his head whipped around and he glared, as if Patroclus was accusing him of anything other than insomnia.

"No," he said after a pause, his expression softening. "I haven't."

As Achilles approached, Patroclus shifted—he'd been sitting sideways on Achilles' couch, and he turned so that Achilles might sit next to him. This, like a lot of Pat's behavior when it came to Achilles, was almost automatic, no matter how long it had been since they'd last seen one another.

Achilles leaned back, his head tipped toward the ceiling, displaying the long line of his throat.

Patroclus had never kidded himself. He still had feelings for Achilles. He'd never stopped. But Achilles, being a goddamn disaster, was so in the habit of lying to himself, he'd admit he felt the same as easily as he'd admit he believed in the supernatural. That is to say, never, at least not without a massive struggle that Patroclus didn't want to put the energy into.

Patroclus had accepted this.

Didn't mean he couldn't admire the way Achilles looked, though.

"Pat, I just can't explain what's happening." He rubbed at the bridge of his nose, then at the place between his brows which wrinkled when he was stressed. He'd done it so often over the years that a little furrow remained there even when his face relaxed. Pat had last seen him two years ago, and on that occasion, he'd found himself wondering when that wrinkle developed.

"Some things are inexplicable." It was much easier for him to pass this off with a shrug than it was for Achilles to do the same. Patroclus had no idea how to ease Achilles. Once, he would have been able to manage it, now, he was no longer capable. "Perhaps you should try to get some rest. I'll stay up, keep an eye on you." Not literally, of course. Watching Achilles sleep would be a bridge too far.

"The man who came to my house to warn me just disappeared into thin air," Achilles said, hoarse with his worn-out panic.

"So you said." Patroclus vaguely wished to touch him, to soothe him. But any touch he gave would carry his affections, and that was no longer his place; someone else had stepped into Achilles' life.

Achilles' boyfriend, however, was largely the source of this problem.

"Am I hallucinating?" Achilles muttered, half to himself. "Am I hallucinating *you*?"

"Okay, now that's just ridiculous." Patroclus gave in and put a hand on his shoulder. "You're not hallucinating me, you can feel me."

Achilles lifted his head. He looked... untethered. In a bad way. His eyes were too bright and underscored by dark circles. His jaw was so tense Patroclus could see where it clenched. The rest of him was locked just as tight.

"Achilles." His name was too easy to sigh. "Come here."

He pitched into Patroclus' embrace so quickly Pat thought he might be headbutted. Achilles didn't relax, still uncomfortably tense, so worked up he shook. Patroclus rested his cheek atop Achilles' head, hands stroking his back, willing him to a calm he'd never reach. As he petted Achilles' hair, he realized he still used the same shampoo, that strange herbal scent that Patroclus used to dislike but grew to love as he associated it with Achilles. He wondered, briefly, if Achilles still wore the same aftershave, too. He'd have to get too close to tell. That scent, he had liked from the start.

Patroclus was about to do something ridiculous, like murmuring comfort to him or asking whether Achilles wanted Patroclus to lay with him while he slept, when there was a *slam* from downstairs.

It was as if the front door had been thrown open so hard it wrenched it on its hinges and the handle burst into the adjacent wall. Achilles bolted up in Patroclus' arms, the anxiety in his face distilling itself into terror.

"I'll see what it is." It would take little effort to look over the railing of the loft and into the main floor of the apartment. Well. It would have taken little effort if Achilles was not grasping him so tight.

As it turned out, Patroclus did not need to look to see what it was, because a figure rose up in front of them, flying up above the lofted area with a longbow drawn. Patroclus didn't exactly have time to check, but he'd bet the arrows matched the ones that had been shot into Achilles' door.

He didn't get a good look at the person. Being. Whatever. Instead, he ducked, grabbing Achilles and bringing him down with. It was a good thing, too, an arrow thudded into Achilles' bookshelf behind them. From what Patroclus could tell, the intruder was floating, was surrounded by a bright golden light, and was still pointing a deadly weapon in his direction, another arrow nocked.

The two of them scrambled behind the couch, and heard an arrowhead pierce straight through the cushions and into the frame of it, just behind their heads.

If there was a way to get out of this without being shot full of holes in the most painful way possible and then dying, Patroclus didn't have it.

He'd squeezed his eyes shut (very helpful, there, he told himself) when the sound like an enormous church-bell rang out through the room. The golden light turned green, and another figure appeared in the flash. Great. Now it wasn't just one supernatural assassin to contend with, there was a pair of them.

Except.

"Get back!" shouted the second one.

Patroclus leaned out from behind the couch at the sound of the shout. The newcomer was dressed all in black, and was pointing what looked like an enormous reaper's scythe at them. Patroclus was not sure if the 'get back' was directed at the two of them, but Achilles was pulling him back anyhow,

the two of them having reversed on which one was frozen in fear and which was responding to the threat.

The one dressed in black passed his scythe to his other hand, and reached out a hand in their direction. Patroclus looked to Achilles, who was staring with some level of recognition.

"Come with me," said the reaper, and Achilles stood.

Patroclus, in what was either one of his more brilliant moves or his more stupid ones, followed Achilles.

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Vanishing into the ether and reappearing in another place was mildly uncomfortable. Patroclus' heart was racing as soon as they landed, as if it had been squeezed in his chest, and his head spun like he'd been on a roller coaster. Achilles seemed to weather it a little better, and managed to keep his footing well enough that he could wrap an arm around Patroclus' waist and keep him from falling over, too.

They were standing in the middle of a field facing an enormous, if slightly time-worn and rather overgrown, wooden cabin. As they appeared, the front door swung open, revealing Zagreus, and Achilles' grip on Patroclus' waist tightened as he stared in his lover's direction.

Zagreus looked much better than he had when Patroclus last stumbled upon him, whole and unharmed, and still wearing Achilles' green T-shirt.

"You're okay!" he cried, bounding down the steps of the wide front porch. He crashed into Achilles which meant he got Patroclus too, flinging his arms around the both of them. "I was so worried," he said, burying his face in Achilles' neck, right where Patroclus had wanted to when he'd held Achilles only moments ago. Patroclus wriggled his way free of the embrace, letting Zagreus hold Achilles with both arms instead.

The man who had brought them there was standing with his arms crossed, looking at the two of them. "Zagreus," he said after a moment. "At least let

them get inside."

"Right, of course. Sorry I had to send Than to pick you up without warning like that," Zagreus said, walking backwards as he spoke, not missing a step as he went up the stairs. "It's... a mess. Sorry."

He must have been referring to the situation they found themselves in and not the house itself, because it was almost perfectly neat. The front door opened up into a small living room, separated from the kitchen by a counter island. At the far end of the living room, Patroclus could see a set of stairs leading up to the second floor, and there was a door to the left that led to a room that looked almost like a greenhouse, except that it contained very few plants. The ones that were there looked like they had been left to grow on their own for several years. Patroclus wondered how they were getting water.

Zagreus stood in the center of the room, looking at the man who'd brought them there, who he'd referred to as 'Than'. He was hovering (literally hovering, Patroclus realized, about three inches off the ground) near an enormous fireplace, which was empty and swept out.

Everything in this house that could be floral print was, and everything else was various tones of wood or stone. Patroclus wondered where exactly they were, as this didn't seem to match the aesthetic sensibilities of either Zagreus or Than.

Patroclus looked at Achilles, who had collapsed into the first chair he could find, and was rubbing the space between his brows again.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Trying to reconcile with the fact that we've just been teleported, and I've no idea where we are."

Patroclus removed his phone from his pocket, trying to at least determine their location, but there was no service to be had. "I have no idea where we are, either," he said. "I think, perhaps, we are owed some explanation."

Zagreus was nervously shifting his weight, and after a while, he also took a seat, on the coffee table facing Achilles. "Right," he said, leaning in so that he could squeeze Achilles' shoulder. "Well, we're in my mum's place. It's not actually too far from Vancouver, so we've not gone a huge distance."

"That's the least important piece of information," Than said, still hovering. Patroclus was his mirror, also standing with his arms crossed on the opposite side of the room, except that Pat's feet were planted on the ground.

"You ought to explain, anyhow," Zagreus told him. "You're the one who has all of the information, here. I don't even know everything."

A look passed between them that served as some form of an argument. It was the kind of thing that could only be done between two people who knew each other well. "Fine," Than said after a moment. "But you have to tell them, without leaving anything out this time, who you really are."

Zagreus looked between Achilles and Patroclus, and then put his hands in his lap, twisting his fingers together. "I will. Please understand that I couldn't tell you everything before because I was afraid you would get hurt."

"And what changed?" Patroclus asked.

When Zagreus looked up at him, Patroclus noticed for the first time that his eyes were two different colors. The left was green, and the right was amber-brown. "What changed," he explained, "is that now I know the people who are after me are going to hurt you whether or not you know, unless I keep you safe. So you ought to know."

7. the Aftermath & the Gifts of Dionysus

Summary for the Chapter:

Patroclus reviews everything he has newly learned and raids the liquor cabinet. Zagreus shows off some glowing new abilities Pat hasn't yet seen.

Zagreus was a prince.

Zagreus was *the* prince, of the Underworld.

And Zagreus was a god.

Patroclus would have joked with Achilles about him incidentally winding up in bed with a prince, but Achilles looked pale, as if he might faint if prodded too much. Well. He probably would not faint. Achilles had never been that type. But he did look too stressed to appreciate Patroclus' sense of humor.

Patroclus came out of their conversation with several understandings, each more ridiculous than the last, and from the way Achilles responded by saying he 'needed some time' and vanishing into the first bedroom he could find, he was having just as much trouble with these as he was with any of the previous revelations.

In any case.

One: Zagreus with the prince of the Underworld, and his escape had less to do with the fact that he didn't want to live in the Underworld and more to do with his poor relationship with his father and his desperate need to find his mother, who'd been in hiding for many years.

Two: Zagreus, being the son of Hades and Persephone, was related to a lot of the gods on Olympus, which was a real place, populated with real gods. When Patroclus asked how the hell the gods planned to interfere, given that they were very far from Greece, Zagreus simply said that didn't matter, they

would interfere anyway. Patroclus supposed Than wasn't the only one with the ability to teleport.

Three: Zagreus' maternal grandmother wanted to find Persephone as much as Zagreus did, and was not above using her grandson to do it. Apparently being separated from your child for literal millenia does that to a person. Patroclus privately thought he would be fine with being separated from his own parents for literal millenia.

Four: The place they were staying was safe due to the protection of Night Incarnate, the goddess Nyx, which meant both that Achilles and Patroclus would be safe there, and that Zagreus would be prevented from his usual fate of being sucked back down into the Underworld from there. This was good, because Patroclus would prefer not to witness somebody being sucked down into the Underworld.

This was also bad, because it meant Patroclus was about to be trapped in a cabin for an indeterminate amount of time with Achilles, and Achilles' possibly-ex-boyfriend (he was not really sure where their relationship stood and he didn't want to ask) while gods squabbled and strategized around them.

All this coalesced to mean one thing:

Patroclus needed to find a drink.

Well, Patroclus also probably needed to find some cell service, to at least tell his agent where he was so that she wouldn't gripe about him dropping off the face of the earth. Again.

But first, a drink.

The kitchen was his starting point—there were a few unlabeled wine bottles in the pantry, which could be a potential option, but he'd really like to discover a liquor cabinet instead.

"Oh, hello." Zagreus leaned over the counter to look at Patroclus while he investigated the cupboards. "Have you seen Achilles?"

"Still hiding," Patroclus said.

Zagreus sighed, looking in the direction of the stairs. "He'll be okay, right?"

"I'm sure he'll come out when he gets hungry." Patroclus found that the kitchen was fairly well-stocked, despite the fact that Zagreus said his mother hadn't lived there in a while. There were even fresh vegetables and meat, as if the place had been prepared beforehand. Maybe Zagreus had gone grocery shopping.

Patroclus felt a little odd about cooking in someone else's house, but he'd managed to pause in his hunt for liquor long enough to throw something together. Zagreus had been outside talking to Than for a long time, and Patroclus would rather clumsily muddle around an unfamiliar kitchen than get involved in whatever that was.

By the time Zagreus returned, the liquor quest was back on.

"What exactly are you looking for?" Zagreus asked him. Patroclus noted that he wasn't in Achilles' T-shirt anymore, and had traded it out for a plain black one and a pair of athletic shorts.

"Alcohol." He'd located a cabinet with a bread-maker, of all things. "I, personally, do not want to be sober while I'm trapped here with my ex-boyfriend and his..." he gestured vaguely at Zagreus. "Sugar baby, or whatever you are."

"I *am* his sugar baby, actually. And there's wine in the pantry."

"Really? I was just joking." Patroclus wouldn't have pegged Achilles as the type. "I was looking for something stronger."

"Well, not his sugar baby anymore, I doubt it. So, your ex-boyfriend—I didn't know that either, by the way—and his ex-sugar-baby." Zagreus walked around the counter, opened a few cabinets until he managed to find some glasses. He did not seem at all familiar with this place either. "The wine's plenty strong, it's from Dionysus. Honestly, you should probably

water it down if you don't want to be completely off your face after one glass."

"Huh." Patroclus inspected one of the bottles, which looked just as innocuous as before. "Well. Never had wine made by a god before."

"First time for everything, I guess," Zagreus said, and wasn't that proving to be the motto of this little excursion.

It was a motto Patroclus could toast to, at least.

Zagreus was right. The wine was strong. It didn't taste overly alcoholic, but Patroclus was either halfway through a glass and felt like he'd already had two, or had managed to drink two without noticing. The former was more likely. Zagreus, as it turned out, didn't need to eat or drink in order to live, and therefore didn't often do either, and particularly did not frequently drink alcohol.

As it followed, he was a complete lightweight.

"Um, well, Than is as old as humanity, and he's a little older than me, but we were kids together, so, uh, I'm slightly younger than the existence of the human race." Zagreus giggled. "I guess *Achilles* is a little young for *me*."

"That's not—no. That isn't what I was asking. How old does *Achilles* *think* you are?" They were sitting at the kitchen table, and Patroclus leaned lazily against it, propping his elbow on the tabletop and his chin on his hand.

"Mm, I think my profile says I'm twenty-four. Twenty-three? Somewhere around there." Zagreus turned his glass in his hands. When he drank, a little spilled over the rim, and his tongue darted out to chase the stray droplet. "Why, how old is *Achilles*?"

"Thirty-six. He's the same age I am." Patroclus chuckled at the idea of *Achilles* taking up with a twenty-three-or-four-year-old man. He was probably scandalized by it. And also immensely turned on.

"So young," Zagreus sighed.

"We're nearing middle-aged, for mortals, actually."

"Yes, but what good is the use of being an immortal god if you can't tell humans they're babies in comparison to your ancientness?" Zagreus managed to hold a straight face for all of three seconds before laughing again. "No, I wouldn't call you babies. I said I'm twenty-whatever because Hermes told me that's what age I seem close to. So you still seem older than me."

Patroclus nudged Zagreus' chair just to see how he reacted—he whined and kicked his feet. "Anyway, what exactly do you do as an immortal god? What are your powers? What are you the god of?"

"Eh. I'm not the god of anything, it's just that if I die, I can come back. It's not very exciting, I can't even teleport. Than can teleport."

Patroclus took another drink. "So, you're basically a normal human man who's incredibly long-lived and will come back if he dies?"

"Pretty much. Although, I don't look like a normal human—well, I mean, not usually." Zagreus set his glass on the table and leaned forward. "Actually, do you want to see?"

Patroclus wasn't exactly certain what he *would* see, but the idea was intriguing. "You're not five times your regular size and absolutely terrifying, are you?" Because he'd need to either be a little more sober or a little more drunk to handle that.

"I'm always this size," Zagreus said, pouting a little about it. He wasn't necessarily short, but Patroclus and Achilles were both quite tall, which meant Zagreus only came up to their shoulders. "Here, watch."

He pulled a pendant necklace out from the collar of his shirt. The pendant was shaped like a glimmering golden leaf, which he plucked off the chain like he was simply pulling a leaf off a tree. As he rubbed it between his fingers, it seemed to sprout, splitting into two again and again until Zagreus was holding a whole crown of leaves. Laurels. He lowered his head, settling them atop his bird's nest of hair, and they turned from bright gold to a

glowing, fiery red, and actually started giving off sparks. Patroclus worried for a moment that the table would catch fire, but when these sparks settled, they simply reverted to being tiny golden leaves.

Zagreus raised his head, his eyes lifting, and Patroclus noted another change: while his left eye remained a pretty emerald green, his right burned bright red. The sclera had gone so dark as to match his pupil, leaving only a red ring.

Patroclus had known, academically, that Zagreus was a supernatural being. Had seen him heal from a wound that should have been debilitating for a human, displaying power that could only be divine in origin.

It was not until now that Patroclus had the innate feeling he was looking at a god.

Also.

"Are your... are your feet on fire?"

They were glowing, at the very least, bright yellow and orange, not just alight but *burning*.

"Oh! Yes. It's normal." Zagreus crossed his ankles and Patroclus could see what looked like flames shifting over his soles. "Won't burn the floors, I promise."

"They look like they'll burn the floors." There was no smoke, though.

To further prove this, Zagreus kicked his feet up and put them into Patroclus' lap. They were warm, even through his jeans, although they did not burn, just as Zagreus swore. The flames ran up Zagreus' calves, going from bright yellow at his soles to a cooler red-orange. It was as if Patroclus had a heating pad in his lap, and he wondered if the Underworld was particularly warm or cold, and if that meant Zagreus was pleasant or entirely irritating to share a bed with.

He curiously ran his fingers over the top of Zagreus' foot, wondering exactly how warm it was, and then he settled his hand there, enjoying the temperature. Zagreus' toes curled.

"I'm not entirely used to people touching them," he said.

"Is it completely normal where you're from? Nobody bats an eye?" Patroclus wondered. When he ran his thumb along the arch of Zagreus' foot too lightly, Zagreus gave a ticklish little flinch, although he did not seem to mind firmer pressure.

"I... well, my father and I, we're the only ones that have them." He ran his hand through his hair in a way that would not disturb his laurels, an easy, practiced motion. "I'm sure most everyone down there is used to seeing us around."

"Right, I'd forgotten, you run the place." Patroclus noted that his feet ran even hotter the more Patroclus touched him, as if the massage was stoking whatever fire lay within.

"Mm. I certainly don't. *Hah*, um, that actually feels pretty good."

"Does it?" Patroclus switched to his opposite foot, and contrary to his previous admission, Zagreus pulled out of his grasp.

"Yes." His face was so, so red. He flushed even deeper than Achilles did.

"A little too good, then, perhaps?" His skin felt overly cool in the wake of Zagreus' presence.

"Yeah, that's a way to put it." Zagreus picked up his glass, downing the rest of it in one. It was too big a swallow and he coughed before continuing. "You're dangerous, Patroclus."

"I'm perfectly innocent," said Patroclus, ignoring the fact that a perfectly innocent man who'd been left alone with Achilles' boy-toy would've behaved himself. Well. Achilles' former boy-toy. So Patroclus technically was not required to behave.

"You're too good with your hands to be perfectly innocent." The quirk of Zagreus' lips told Patroclus he liked it that way.

"And you're too quick to put your feet in my lap to be perfectly innocent, either."

"I could put the rest of myself in your lap," he suggested, setting his empty glass on the table. He nearly missed the table entirely. Oh, yes, he was definitely drunk. Patroclus, thankfully, had been pacing himself a little better. But the lines of propriety were still blurry. And he was inclined to give Zagreus whatever he wanted. Up to a point, that is.

"You'll knock the chair over," he said.

"Then just come here," Zagreus said, scooting his own chair closer. "I am currently very interested in kissing somebody, and Achilles doesn't want to look at me, much less kiss me."

"If we are going to be stuck here for an indeterminate amount of time, it's a bad idea to start kissing people," Patroclus remarked. "Could make things awkward."

"Oh, it's a terrible idea. I think I like terrible ideas right now." Zagreus leaned in, close enough that Patroclus should have backed away. He remained precisely where he was at.

In this moment, Patroclus understood intimately how Achilles would have been drawn in by this man. He was as earnest as he was seductive, and immensely charming to boot. The pretty face didn't hurt, either.

Patroclus cupped his face and Zagreus leaned into it with all the hunger of a man starved for touch. Was it put-on, or was he truly so lonely without Achilles? They'd both know a thing or two about that, Patroclus guessed. "How strange you are," he mused, "and how lovely for it."

Zagreus missed his mouth, on the first try, or else intentionally kissed him on the corner of it. Patroclus held him in place for the second, lining things up better, and Zagreus pressed forward, balancing himself on Patroclus'

shoulders, almost falling out of his chair. Patroclus graciously held him steady.

Zagreus' tongue, Patroclus realized, as he deepened the kiss, was just as hot as his soles.

Zagreus pulled back and away so abruptly he plopped back into his chair with a loud thump. Patroclus didn't immediately understand the retreat, but after a moment, he realized—Zagreus had heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

Achilles gave them a curious look, as if he hadn't expected them to be sitting there when he came down. As if there was anywhere else in this place one might spend an evening.

"Why... why do you look like that?" Or, perhaps, as if he'd suddenly come across one of them significantly more on-fire than he'd been. That could be the cause of the confusion.

"This is how I look. Usually." He *usually* did not go around wearing that deep of a blush, Patroclus expected, but that was beside the point.

Achilles shook his head. "I think I've become entirely numb to it all." He sounded entirely numb to it all. He sounded exhausted down to his bones. Patroclus, far too intoxicated to deal with this, had to shove down the urge to hug him.

"There's plenty to eat," Patroclus said, as Achilles started poking around the kitchen. "There's also wine."

"I've noticed that. How much of it did you drink?"

"It's very powerful wine."

"That doesn't answer my question."

Zagreus, apparently trying to get to Achilles, really did fall off his chair, scrambling upright and then darting around the counter. "Do you... if it makes you uncomfortable, I can go back to looking how I did." He was

puppy-like, eager to please. Achilles did not give him the attention he begged for, and Patroclus felt a bit sorry for him.

"It's fine, lad. I'm coming to accept that things will not be normal for some time, now." He didn't look at Zagreus as he spoke, so he perhaps had not accepted this entirely.

"I... I told you this before, Achilles, but I really didn't intend to drag you into all this. I'm so sorry."

"I appreciate the sentiment." This time, Achilles did look over his shoulder. "Zagreus... are your feet glowing?"

A smile finally broke across Zagreus' face, and once again, Patroclus was all the more deeply aware of what Achilles saw in him. That smile was lovely. "Come on, sit with us. We'll catch you up on what you've missed."

They moved to the couch, because Patroclus complained that he was tired and that the chairs weren't comfortable. Zagreus sprawled in between them, his head on Patroclus' shoulder, his feet in Achilles' lap this time. Achilles, probably because he was eating, did much better at not touching them. Zagreus poured Achilles a glass of wine—well, Zagreus poured *himself* another glass, and Patroclus proclaimed him entirely too drunk and passed it off to Achilles.

Achilles took the glass from him with the slightest hint of a smile.

Alright, maybe Patroclus would survive his time with them.

8. the Novel & the Mundane

Summary for the Chapter:

Achilles explores their new surroundings, explores something new with Zagreus, and is reminded of his least favorite thing about Patroclus.

Achilles spent his second day exploring Persephone's cottage and the surrounding grounds. The house itself was not extremely large, perhaps no larger than his apartment, but with additional rooms so as to house more than one person. Curious, as nobody had mentioned Persephone living with anybody else. There were two bedrooms, each with a double-bed, and Achilles had claimed the one at the far end of the hall because it was the first one he saw. Zagreus had told Patroclus to take the other, claiming that being a god meant he did not need sleep, although he had slept the night he stayed at Achilles' place, and he was curled up on the couch when Achilles woke and came downstairs and did not move until after Achilles finished breakfast.

It was possible that was just a hangover, though. Did gods get hangovers?

Upstairs, there was also an office-slash-library, with a large desk that held some miscellaneous notebooks and, for some odd reason, an enormous orange quill pen. Tall bookshelves lined the walls, so overstuffed they put the minimally-styled ones at Achilles' home to shame. A cozy chair for reading fit in between two of the towering shelves and a window-seat that looked particularly inviting took up the space opposite. Achilles guessed Patroclus would take up residence here once he woke up and had time to poke around.

Despite the size of the bedrooms being relatively small, the bathroom was quite large, and contained a bathtub so big Achilles thought even he might be able to stretch out in it. He didn't bother with anything more than a quick shower, though. All of the toiletries were in bar form, even shampoo, although Achilles pulled up his hair instead of bothering with washing it just yet.

Out back was the largest garden Achilles had ever seen, which looked like it had not been tended to in a while and yet was still not choked with weeds. All of the plants in it flourished out of control, a little too overgrown for Achilles to venture in and actually attempt to figure out what they all were. Over it all hung an apple tree which was so large one would need a ladder to climb up and pick the fruit.

He walked the perimeter of the house, starting close to it and venturing further as he went. The cottage was surrounded by woods, but on one side there was a clearing which contained a large pond. A dock, the wood bleached pale from years of sunlight, stretched out onto it, and though it seemed old, it was well-built and sturdy under his feet. It was almost impossible to see the water because of how many lily pads spread out across the surface of the pond, and dozens of dragonflies buzzed around it.

Halfway across the pond, however, there was something shimmering in the air, a purplish-blue haze almost like the distortions that surrounded the Fury Megaera when Achilles had encountered her. It stretched as far as he could see on either side, and Achilles surmised that this must be the protective barrier which Zagreus said hung over this place. If he looked above he could no longer see it, but he also could not see the point at which it vanished.

When he tossed a rock at it, it pinged off, falling harmlessly to the ground. However ephemeral the barrier looked, it was solid.

Achilles sat on the dock, legs crossed, and stared at that shifting haze of color, the force which was, as far as he could understand, trapping him here.

Despite that fact, he was remarkably calm.

Perhaps this feeling of tranquility came from the first decent night's sleep he'd gotten in a long time. The unfamiliar bed should have kept him awake late into the night, but all the adrenaline from the day had worn off and left him exhausted enough to collapse the second he could be horizontal.

It was strangely peaceful here, hidden away from the rest of the world. He should have been brimming with anxiety about his work and his mother and

the fact that they'd vanished and reappeared here while a strange being that was likely some sort of god invaded his house. And yet, it was hard to be pressed about anything when the surroundings were so idyllic.

Or perhaps he'd just been so completely broken down he couldn't feel the anxiety anymore. That could also be it.

Achilles was drawn from his reverie by what sounded like a shout of exertion, followed by a shockwave that flattened a lot of the grass in the field around the house. He sprang up, worried for a moment that they were somehow under attack again, but Zagreus, as it turned out, was alone in the field.

He was holding a sword, of all things, which Achilles supposed was not quite as strange as the scythe Thanatos had used against whatever invader had gotten into Achilles' home. Achilles couldn't see much of the blade except that it was bright red, because Zagreus moved fast.

He was good with it. Achilles had trained with swords, himself, but it had been a while since he'd been hired for something that required them. Zagreus moved with a strange sort of ease, as if something had educated him on how to fight with this, but Achilles felt near-certain it was less that he'd been tutored and more that he'd needed to learn in order to save his own life.

Zagreus was also well-aware of his surroundings. He slowed his rapid-paced drills, and drove the point of his sword into the grass. "Enjoying the show?" he asked Achilles. He didn't look like he'd been at it long, or else it took a lot more than that to make a god break a sweat.

"You're impressive," Achilles said, feeling no need to disguise his admiration.

Zagreus grinned, a bit of shyness in it. He was not used to being complimented on this, Achilles realized. "You learn to be, when you've escaped the Underworld as many times as I have," he said. "I'd be nothing without a sword in my hand, though." Now that it wasn't moving, Achilles could see his sword more clearly. The blade was indeed red—whether this

was a coating or some kind of strange unearthly metal, Achilles wasn't certain. There was a skull set into the hilt, surrounded by a red and yellow wreath of laurels that resembled the one on Zagreus' head.

"You've got no hand-to-hand combat experience?" Achilles asked.

"No, uh, monsters from hell itself, and all. I usually end up hurting my hand more than I hurt them, when one of them manages to knock my sword away and I try to hit them."

"Probably because nobody's trained you properly."

"Are you offering to teach me?" Zagreus teased, throwing a playful punch in Achilles' direction.

Honestly, it'd been a while since he'd even attended the boxing class he liked to go to with a few of the others on his team, even longer since he'd actually trained somebody. But he could at least do enough to make sure Zagreus wasn't left in dire straits next time somebody knocked his sword out of his hand.

Also, even though he'd been playing, his form was just so bad.

"Why not?"

Zagreus was, for all his claims that he was easily distracted, a decent student. He listened to Achilles' instructions and took his criticisms to heart, and it seemed that no matter how long they worked, Zagreus didn't tire.

There was a solitary glaring issue, though. This was the most physical contact they'd had since... well, probably since their last date. And Achilles may not have been kissing Zagreus breathless on his doorstep before saying goodnight, but he was adjusting the motion of Zagreus' hands, moving his shoulders into position, showing him how to swing from the hip. It was enough to bring back the vivid memories of Zagreus' body pressed against his.

"Feel this?" he asked, his hand on Zagreus' scapula, while Zagreus positioned his arms. "This is where you should be. It's not going to be your usual range of motion, so you'll need to stretch—well, actually, I'm not sure about that. Does your godhood help keep your muscles from getting sore?"

"Hm? No, not really. Just makes me feel better, faster, after the fact. So, wait, like this?"

"Like *this*," Achilles corrected him. His back was so warm through his shirt. "And don't move your arms and your shoulders so much—it's your hips that should be moving."

"You know that I know how to move my hips," Zagreus joked, although his form did improve.

Achilles couldn't stop thinking about the first time he'd touched Zagreus here, hands on his back while they kissed in the back corner of the bar. "You know, it's not generally polite to flirt with your instructor."

"Even when that instructor's gotten you off more times than you can count on both hands?"

This was when Achilles decided the lesson should probably end. He put Zagreus through his last set, so it didn't seem immediately abrupt, then told him he wanted to head back to the house for lunch. He couldn't keep from asking if Zagreus wanted to join him.

"No, I'm fine," Zagreus said. He held the door open for Achilles, and as he passed Zagreus, Achilles was once again struck by the unusual appearance of his right eye. He'd been able to focus on other things while he'd been training Zagreus, but now that there was nothing to distract him, he was stunned by how surreal Zagreus looked. "I don't actually *need* to eat—it's helpful, I mean, it heals me if I'm injured, but I don't die without it."

"Lucky you," said Patroclus, who was meandering around the kitchen and also eavesdropping.

The door swung shut behind them, and Achilles observed the absolute mess the kitchen had become, a clear indicator that Patroclus was trying his hand at domesticity.

He suddenly remembered how much he hated the way Patroclus cooked.

Not his *cooking*—Patroclus was a better chef than Achilles—but the way he did it. He wouldn't decide what he was making beforehand, and instead he would putter around and set all of the ingredients (usually including several he would not need) on the counter, cluttering up any space that would have been left for drying dishes, which he did not wash while he was cooking. Instead, he let them fill up the sink, until Achilles was finally driven so crazy he'd hip-check Patroclus aside and take over for him.

"I know you're capable of multi-tasking," Achilles had said to him once.

"That doesn't mean I have to," Patroclus had replied. *"It comes out better when I'm intentional about it."*

It didn't help that Patroclus could usually not be motivated to start cooking until Achilles prodded him several times, and the fact that it took so long (the man could not be convinced to roast vegetables at a higher temperature for a shorter amount of time) meant that they usually ended up eating much later than Achilles wanted on nights when Patroclus cooked.

From the looks of things, Patroclus had not changed much since they roomed together at university.

"Pat, what on earth are you making?"

"It's been a long time since I've heard you ask that," said Patroclus, who'd filled the counter with every vegetable imaginable, three different kinds of pasta, and what looked like half the contents of the spice rack. "And I don't yet know. Stop making that face at me."

"You're not even looking at me," said Achilles, who was indeed making that face.

"I can sense it."

Zagreus stepped into the kitchen and hopped up to sit on the only bare area of counter space. Thankfully, this kitchen was bigger than the one in the apartment they'd had fifteen years ago. "You two know each other very well," he observed. His tone was carefully neutral, but he was grinning. Achilles wondered how much Patroclus had told him.

"All too well," Patroclus agreed. He reached into the pantry cabinet that went from floor to ceiling at the very end of the kitchen.

"Patroclus, no."

"What? I'm not making this for you." Patroclus said, innocently setting the most offensive of his ingredient choices the closest to Achilles. "Good to know you're still picky."

"It's the smell," Achilles said. He swore Patroclus did this so that Achilles would kick him out and take over, and then Patroclus wouldn't have to cook.

"I thought it was that you didn't trust a vegetable that makes you cry." Damn his perfect memory for all the stupid little things Achilles said, and damn his proclivity for bringing them up whenever suited him best. He grinned like a complete ass about it, too, as always. "Fine. I won't put any onions in, and will use a massive amount of garlic instead. Happy?"

"Yes, actually. Do you want help, then?"

"Only if you don't complain about my extensive consideration over seasonings."

"I cannot promise that," Achilles said, reaching past Patroclus to grab a knife. "Will you please put away all these extraneous vegetables. I don't even know why you got them all out—I doubt you'll use anything other than zucchini, tomatoes, and maybe those." He pointed at the bell peppers with the sharp end of the knife, which did not seem to bother Patroclus any.

"I've got it," said Zagreus, gathering up the ridiculous amount of ingredients cluttering the counter. Also the onion. Thank god. "Does cooking always involve so much bickering?"

"For us," Patroclus said, "yes. Always. Achilles, my dear, at least put those in a bowl instead of piling them up on the cutting board. You've no sense of *mise en place*."

"Only if you wash it," said Achilles, who liked extra dishes about as much as he liked Patroclus emptying the entire pantry onto the counter.

Zagreus paused with the refrigerator door open. "'My dear'?" he asked, looking between the two of them.

Patroclus leaned over him to close the fridge. "Force of habit."

"It's been fifteen years," Achilles said, although he would not have noticed the endearment if Zagreus had not pointed it out, so perhaps the force of habit affected him as well.

"You know what they say about old habits," Patroclus said.

Zagreus, wisely, said nothing else at all and instead asked Patroclus for a lesson on how to cook pasta, which of course led to an extensive debate on whether you put the water or the noodles in first. ("The water, Patroclus, who in their right mind puts the noodles in first?" followed by: "You're the one who always complains about it taking so long. This is faster.")

If Zagreus came out of this with a net negative amount of knowledge about the culinary arts, Achilles would not blame him.

9. Stress Relief & Additional Tension

Summary for the Chapter:

Frustrated that Thanatos claims Zagreus can do nothing to help his current situation, Zagreus gets wet, dries off, and gets wet again. And then, he learns what Patroclus is writing.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello hello, thank you for patiently waiting for all the porn! Zag still has a ways to go before he actually manages to nab these boys, but he can have some fun all by himself in the meantime ;)

Thanatos did not return until a full day had passed, and even then, he hovered in the yard like an enormous, very socially awkward bird of prey instead of knocking on the front door.

It was cloudy today, wind kicking up like it was going to storm. The top of the protective dome around them was thinner, and it would allow the rain through. Looking up at it made Zagreus feel a little less trapped, but it was an illusion. Even if he could float like Than or Nyx or Hypnos, there was still a barrier there, if a semi-permeable one, and he would not be able to escape through it.

"You can't," Thanatos was saying, which was exactly what Zagreus did not want to hear from him. "I'm serious, you're safer here, and there's nothing you can do to help." At least Thanatos had brought the rest of his weapons, in an enormous chest that now sat incongruously on the front porch.

"Than," he whined, leaning against him where they were sat on the porch and grumbling when his pauldron remained as pointy as ever. Thanatos elbowed him off. "If I could just tell them, just say to Demeter, 'hey, I don't know where my mother even is, so you can stop trying to hunt her down by way of me,' it'd all be *fine*."

"And what exactly leads you to think she'd believe that? Zagreus. Anyone you say that to is just going to think you're defending her. There's *nothing you can do right now*."

Zagreus lowered his head. Than was sitting close enough to him that some of Zagreus' laurel leaves collected on his robe, shimmering gold against the black. "I hate when there's nothing I can do. Give me something I can do."

"My mother and I are trying to sort things out. I promise."

He'd said this before, but Zagreus had felt helpless then and he felt helpless now. Escaping the Underworld had started as something he could *do*, a way he could physically help himself out of his situation. Now, Zagreus' own restless energy had torn him down from his heights of happiness over finally getting out of the damn place. He almost wished he'd stayed where he was.

"Zagreus. Just... make the most of your time here. It's your mother's house, it's the most connected you've been with her in a long time. And, well. Your mortal friends do seem... interesting."

"The mortals who I have trapped here and therefore are doubtless furious with me, you mean," Zagreus said. He was not entirely certain this was true, although he would not fault Patroclus and Achilles for it.

"Yes. Them. I don't know, find some way to make it up to them. Find something to read, your mother has a library in there almost as big as yours at the House."

Granted, Zagreus hardly read any of the books on his shelves, too prone to starting and then stopping and then forgetting what had happened when he last read anything. Thanatos knew this. Thanatos knew how difficult it would be for Zagreus to be stuck here, how much Zagreus hated feeling trapped, how hard-won freedom was all Zagreus worked for. He knew this, and said all of it anyway, and if Thanatos was giving him meaningless comfort, Zagreus' situation really must have been dire.

He would have said something else, but when he turned, Thanatos was already gone.

— — —

The rain started coming down in dreary torrents, and it forced Zagreus into the house, although he did not get very far.

"Stop right there, you're soaked." It was Patroclus, who was sitting in the living room with what looked like a cup of coffee. He took a long drink of it, just staring at Zagreus and not, as Zagreus presumed he might, getting him a towel. Sure, Zagreus probably looked like a vermin that'd drowned in the Styx, with his hair dripping into his face and his shirt plastered to his skin, but it was no reason for Patroclus to grin at him like that.

He was still getting water all over the floors even if Patroclus wouldn't let him further into the house. His feet were making it steam a little. Rain had been exciting, when Zagreus first made it to the surface. It was less so now.

"Alright, you're good. Carry on," Patroclus said, still offering no help.

Zagreus shook his head, crossing to the closet adjacent to the stairs, where he knew there were towels. "Did you get your things Thanatos dropped off?" he asked, scrubbing it through his hair. Deciding his shirt was a lost cause, he peeled it off and made to wring it out in the sink. Patroclus did not answer, and so Zagreus clarified. "The suitcase, I mean."

"Oh. Yes, right. You mean *Achilles'* things. Yes, see?" Patroclus gestured to himself, indicating the fact that he was no longer wearing the same clothes he'd been in for the past day and a half. "It's a good thing I can fit in his clothes, and a good thing he went paranoid enough that he packed like he was going to have to leave at any moment. Which I suppose he did."

"To be fair, Than doesn't know where your house is."

"I suppose not." Patroclus was still watching him, his mug halfway to his lips. "Are you alright?"

"Fine, why?"

"You're wringing that out like you want to destroy something."

He dropped the shirt before he actually did destroy it. "Well. Yeah. I've just found out I can do nothing to get us out of here, which is my least favorite situation to be in. Tried to blow off some steam training, but, well." He gestured at the window behind himself, which was being pelted with rain. "What else am I to do?" His other hobby of choice was also out, because somehow fishing in magma sounded interesting but fishing in the rain sounded torturous.

"I don't know, Zagreus, blow off steam some other way," Patroclus suggested. "I'm sure you're creative enough to think of one."

"Thanks to the weather, I am quite literally producing steam."

Patroclus laughed, coming into the kitchen to refill his mug. He scruffed at Zagreus' hair as he passed. "You're already soaked through. I'd suggest you take a warm bath so you don't catch chill, but I don't actually think gods have that worry."

Zagreus was all too focused on the way Patroclus' lips looked as he took another sip of his drink. Actually, that *might* improve some things. The bathroom was quite literally the only place Zagreus had to himself around here, and it made him recall how nice it felt kissing Achilles in the shower after their first date... okay, yes.

"Might as well," he said. "Just... don't want to chance it, right?"

Patroclus always looked at you like he could see right through, but Zagreus felt that perceptiveness especially powerfully today. "Have fun, then, I suppose."

Yeah, he definitely knew what Zagreus was about to do.

Zagreus glanced in the mirror as he entered the bathroom, trying to shove some of his hair out of his face. His hair was unruly enough when it was

dry. Now, it just hung limply over his forehead.

The sun out here had given him a few more freckles across his nose and cheeks. He hadn't known that would happen before he made his way to the surface, but the sun left little marks wherever it touched his skin. Achilles had remarked, when they showered together, that they were cute. He'd kissed one on Zagreus' shoulder.

Zagreus turned on the water as hot as it would go, the bathroom clouding with steam as the tub filled. It was huge, large enough that Zagreus could easily relax against the side and stretch out his feet. His apartment hadn't had a bathtub at all. Neither did Achilles' place, come to think of it, unless Achilles was hiding a second bathroom somewhere.

He probably didn't have to turn the water temperature up so high, after all, the flames on his feet would keep it warm, but there was something about slipping into a hot bath that felt particularly luxurious. It reminded him of the baths at the House, except even more pleasant, because the water didn't have the metallic tang in its scent that even filtered Styx water did.

He ducked his head under the water, rewetting his hair so he could more easily push it back off his forehead, and then leaned against the side of the tub, closing his eyes.

It was all too easy to think of how the size of this tub meant he could fit a second person in here.

His brain waffled between inserting Achilles or Patroclus into his fantasy, as he began to run his fingers along the insides of his thighs under the water. Eventually, he settled on picturing Achilles, if only because he knew what Achilles looked like naked, the cut of his hips, the shape of his thighs, the soft, near-invisible hair on his chest, golden as his hair. It got darker down his belly and around his cock.

He pictured Achilles straddling him in the bath. His skin would go pink from all the hot water, the steam clinging to him. Maybe a drop of water rolling down his chest, perfect for Zag to lick up.

Achilles had only seen Zagreus in his mortal guise, and Zag couldn't help but wonder what he'd think of the fact that his dick glowed as bright as his feet did. Maybe Achilles would want to grind against him, maybe wrap both their cocks up in one hand and stroke them off together.

He started to touch himself, trying hard to keep it the way Achilles would do it—slow, deliberate. The water made everything muted and warm, and Zag tipped his head back, his eyes closing.

It hadn't been mentioned in the time they were together, but during one particular phone call, Achilles had asked Zagreus, *"have you ever found yourself just completely overcome with the urge to be fucked?"* So, yeah, it wasn't too hard to imagine Achilles being interested in bottoming. And the noises he'd make... Zagreus was half-tempted to grab his phone and play those old recordings of Achilles getting off, but it felt strangely like a violation now that he was no longer in a relationship with Achilles.

If he were truly remorseful about picturing his ex-lover, he wouldn't have kept going, though.

The water would shift and churn around them as Achilles rocked in his lap, filling himself with Zagreus, the tiled walls of the bathroom making the perfect surface for his voice to echo off. Zagreus' own soft breaths and the noises he couldn't quite keep inside already sounded loud in the empty bathroom, as did the slosh of the water as he started to speed up the motions of his wrist, thinking less about the way Achilles had touched his cock before and more about how Achilles would fuck himself. He'd been *needy* on that call, telling Zagreus he was making do with his fingers but he'd rather have Zag.

Achilles' hands were lovely, long slim fingers, and they'd look incredible as he spread himself, maybe showing off for Zagreus a little. Confidence was not Achilles' strong suit, but he'd look so *good* playing with himself just to tease.

He'd make Zag beg.

And Zag would gladly obey, telling Achilles how beautiful he was, how much he wanted his hole, *just let me fuck you, Sir, I'll do anything, please please please*. Head tipped back, except that Achilles would grab him by the back of his neck and make him watch. He'd give Zagreus his hand, have him wash off his fingers, and Zagreus wouldn't be able to stop thinking about how those had just been inside him.

"Quiet, lad," he imagined, "Or do you want Patroclus to hear you?" A hand pressed over his mouth. Maybe fingers fucking past his lips, not totally able to muffle his cries because when Achilles finally dropped down onto his cock, Zagreus was gonna scream.

He shoved his own hand over his mouth now, palm flat because yeah, no, he really would rather they not hear. Not yet.

Achilles could move his hips, that Zagreus knew for certain. He'd be unbelievable in Zagreus' lap, the water making it a smooth slide—probably. Zagreus had never had sex underwater. Rivers full of blood and lava and memory-stealing smoke didn't allow for that, and the fountain chambers always had that problem of dozens of floating shades. Zagreus was a slut and an exhibitionist, but he wasn't going to subject unwilling miscellaneous shades to his own perversions.

Achilles. Right.

He'd feel amazing, hot and tight and so much better than Zagreus' fist, although Zagreus' fist was still doing it for him pretty well. He was close, his breath coming hot through his nose, soft noises trapped behind his palm. More than one of those noises, thankfully trapped, would have been Achilles' name.

His feet slipped on the smooth floor of the tub, one finally catching on the rim of it as his body tensed and his back bowed, his head tipping back against the edge of the tub.

When he finally removed his hand, his little sigh of satisfaction sounded remarkably loud and unfettered. His eyes rolled closed, body slipping down beneath the water, every muscle loose and warm and happy.

Now.

Where exactly were the cleaning supplies located in this place?

— — —

Zagreus left the bath feeling better refreshed, at least. Sure, he was also now forced to admit that he was desperately longing for one or both (on second thought, definitely both) of the other occupants of this house, but he was very relaxed about it now. Or at least he told himself he was relaxed.

He poked around the bedrooms—the one Achilles had taken was locked, which probably meant he was sleeping, which was strange. Mortals didn't usually sleep in the middle of the day, if Zagreus recalled correctly.

Or perhaps Achilles was occupying his time the same way Zagreus had been.

Zagreus resolved himself not to think about that any longer. This resolve held for about five seconds. Then he had to stop looking at Achilles' door.

Patroclus' room was empty, his bed left unmade. There was a little pile of clothes in the middle of it, all of them folded up, which must have been what Achilles gave him from his suitcase. Zagreus wondered if sharing clothes felt like another of those 'old habits' for the two of them.

Patroclus himself, Zagreus realized, was no longer in the living room, but had moved to the library-slash-office, where he was curled up in the armchair with a notebook on his lap. He looked up when Zagreus entered, but did not address him, going back to whatever he'd been writing. Zagreus peered out the window. It was still raining, but it was not the downpour that had stopped him from training earlier that day.

"I see you've mostly dried off," Patroclus said, probably referring to the way his hair was still damp from the shower. It'd dry out and start sticking back up soon enough.

"Yeah, I only wish my clothes would do the same." Zagreus had brought his backpack with him, but it didn't have many changes of clothes, which meant he was back in the dark green T-shirt he'd inadvertently borrowed by way of bleeding all over his other one. They were both, he noted, wearing things that technically belonged to Achilles. He found himself amused by the fact that Achilles' shirts hung loose on Zagreus but were almost too tightly fitted on Patroclus.

It certainly stretched tight across his chest.

Patroclus scratched out something he'd just written and then continued, even as he spoke. "You could toss them in the dryer downstairs."

"H hadn't thought of that, honestly." He rubbed at his jaw, stepping back around the desk and then taking a seat on the footstool that was in front of Patroclus' chair, which Patroclus was not bothering with. "If I'd known I was going to be here for... well, for however long, I would've brought... I don't know. Something with which to occupy myself. And maybe a razor." He'd yet to find one in the house, which did make sense, if his mother was the only person who'd lived here.

Patroclus hardly looked before reaching out, running his fingertips along Zagreus' chin. "You aren't even a little scruffy." He looked up now, inspecting Zagreus' face. "I don't think you've much to worry about."

"Ha, no, it doesn't grow very fast. But it is dark."

"Have you ever considered just wearing a beard?"

"Absolutely not." Zagreus shook his head. "I already look more like my father than I'd like to, thanks." He tried to peek at the notebook Patroclus was holding, but upside-down and at an oblique angle, his handwriting was impossible to read, however neat it may have been. All he could tell was that the page was nearly full. "What have you been doing?"

"I'm writing," he said. "It's my profession. Ordinarily I have a laptop, but alas, that was not in my possession when I was whisked away to this place. And doing it on my phone sounds like torture." He finished whatever

sentence he'd been on and then shut the notebook with the pen still marking the page. "Thankfully, this library has a lot of blank notebooks in it."

Zagreus, who had not done much exploration of the library, had not noticed this. "Wouldn't it take longer to do it by hand?"

"Yes, of course, but I'm enjoying it for the novelty," Patroclus said. "I am not enjoying the hand cramps, however." He stretched out his arms, interlacing his fingers to press his palms forward.

Zagreus settled his fingers gently on Patroclus' wrist. "Might I?" he asked, and Patroclus gave him his hand. He shifted so that his feet were stretched out on the ottoman, his legs tucking neatly against the side of Zagreus' thigh. Zagreus took Patroclus' hand in both of his, palm-up, pressing his thumbs into Patroclus' palm. "Thought I might pay you back for the other night."

"You certainly don't need to," Patroclus said. "I was not touching you out of selflessness."

"And what says I'm doing it out of selflessness now?" Zagreus wasn't entirely sure where writing for so long would make one's hand cramp, but he knew the feeling from using Coronacht, firing arrow after arrow, the repetitive motion putting stress on muscles he didn't even know he could work too hard. "Anyway," a change of topic, yes, good, "isn't it unusual for mortals to write with their left hand?"

"Less common, yes." Patroclus was smiling at him. "Strange to hear us referred to as 'mortals'."

"Oh! Is that not what m—is that not what people up here would use?" Zagreus thought for a moment, his fingers working over Patroclus' knuckles. "I suppose not, it's not as if I called myself that when I was pretending to be one."

"I suppose we'd just say 'human', although that implies you're not human, and I'm not certain whether that's true."

"I'm... hm. With all due respect, I'm not really in need of that existential crisis right now, Patroclus." He said it with a smile, although internally was a bit baffled and was going to be thinking about this for hours. Better than thinking about Patroclus' hands, though, or Patroclus' voice or his mouth or the way he touched Zagreus... "But, um, what are you writing?"

"I've no idea, honestly," Patroclus said. "I usually write historical fiction. I pride myself on being very well-researched and accurate to the period—but of course, all my usual sources are back home. So I've been doing something entirely different."

"Oh?" Zagreus had no idea what mortal—human?—historical fiction would involve. He didn't know what human history involved, in the first place.

"Yes. I've never actually written a romance before. I'm told the lack of a romantic subplot is a benefit and a detriment to my work in equal turns, so I'm not certain whether it's a good thing or a bad one. Certainly a diversion from my usual, though." He let his hand rest in Zagreus' even though Zagreus was no longer really touching him, just holding. "So much so that I might need to add a pseudonym. If it even comes out publishable, that is."

Zagreus stroked his palm again just to feel it. His skin was soft, although he did have a callus on his middle finger where the pen he was writing with had been pressing. He must have written long-hand enough at some point to cause this, at least. "Why would you need that?"

"Because, if someone who knows my usual fare would be a bit surprised to open a book with my name on it and find..." He gestured vaguely at his notebook, but did so with his right hand so that his left was still in Zagreus' grasp.

"Romance?"

"Erotic romance," Patroclus amended, looking Zagreus straight in the eye all the while. "Entirely pornographic, really." He flipped his palm in Zagreus' grasp, squeezing his hand briefly before getting up and leaving the *entirely pornographic erotic romance* he'd been writing lying innocuously in the chair.

Zagreus did not respond, just sort of stared at the notebook. "So, um—"

"I'm going to make something for dinner," Patroclus said. "Mind knocking on Achilles' door for me? Tell him if he doesn't come out to help, I'm putting raw onions on everything."

10. the Cavern & the (other definition of) Novel

Summary for the Chapter:

Achilles, definitely *not* avoiding Patroclus and Zagreus, explores. Zagreus discovers a new love for literature. Patroclus discovers Zagreus discovering a new love for literature.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello there! This chapter was v fun because I got to include Pat's book! It was definitely a struggle trying to make his writing style not sound just like mine but hopefully the first person helped!

Achilles was not avoiding Patroclus and Zagreus.

He had no reason to, first off, and no ability to do so, considering the fact that they were living in one house together. Certainly his newfound routine of holing up in his chosen bedroom or finding himself outside whenever possible had nothing to do with the fact that anything else would force him to engage in casual conversation with two men he'd slept with, one of whom he'd loved and one of whom he'd wanted to, if given the opportunity.

Of course not, that would be ridiculous.

He usually had the mornings to himself. Patroclus had never been an early riser, and Achilles suspected he'd chosen every job he'd ever had solely so that he could indulge his night-owl tendencies (why else would he have gone from being an EMT to a novelist?). Zagreus hardly ever slept, from what Achilles could tell, but as of yet he'd spent every morning fishing at the pond or in the yard with his sword, which of course had once led to Achilles making a fool of himself trying to get his hands on Zagreus if only for a moment.

Zagreus probably would have done the same today, had it stopped raining, but it was still a nonstop downpour outside. Zagreus, now confined, seemed a bit antsy. Last night, Patroclus had tried to teach him to play cards, which

seemed to occupy him yet frustrate him. This was possibly because Patroclus thought cheating was fine if it spiced up the gameplay.

By their third morning at the cabin, there were only two places in the house Achilles had not explored: the basement and the attic. He didn't want to try the attic today, as Zagreus seemed to be spending time in the library (Achilles had heard him humming something quite off-key in there) and the ladder that led to the attic unfolded from the ceiling in direct view of the library door.

The basement was much safer if Achilles wanted to avoid Zagreus, which of course he did not, but, theoretically.

It was a dark, windowless room, cinderblock walls and a musty smell that Achilles associated with a room that wasn't able to be aired out. Achilles thumbed on the light on his phone (which was running low on battery because in his definitely-not-avoiding-Patroclus he hadn't had a chance to ask Pat for his phone charger back). Once he managed to locate the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, he tugged the attached cord, which was frayed and longer than it needed to be, hanging in Achilles' face. It flickered, coming on with a little electric *plink*.

The bulb did not illuminate much, both because it was not a proper source of light and because there wasn't much down here to illuminate. Cinder block walls, the wooden staircase Achilles had come up, a water heater. Immediately across from the staircase, there was an entire rack of gardening tools fastened to the wall, and several boxes of the same piled up along the perimeter of the room. They had not been used recently, as with most things in the house. Achilles still did not understand how all of the food in the kitchen had not expired, but perhaps it, like his suitcase, had been delivered by a divine being who probably had better things to do than being used as a courier.

Then again, Zagreus had not explained what exactly Than did, and so for all Achilles knew, he could in fact be an Underworld courier of sorts.

The majority of the open space was full of old furniture, covered with drop-cloths, which Achilles didn't bother to peek under. He became distracted by

the most interesting feature of the basement, which was what looked like a metal barn door taking up the wall to the left of the stairs. Achilles had to step over several more boxes (all filled with more gardening supplies) to reach it, and once he did, he found that there was a chain wound through the door handle that would have kept it shut, had the lock on it not been hanging open.

The chain clattered loudly as Achilles pulled it through the handle, the padlock pinging off the concrete floor and the chain slithering after. The door itself was difficult to pull open, the tracks that it rolled along protesting his attempt to use them. Achilles shoved at the handle and it finally gave with an enormous creak, crashing thunderously at the end of the track once momentum sent it rolling open.

Behind it was a tunnel. Like the rest of the basement, it had cinder block walls, unremarkable except for the fact that Achilles could not see the end of it.

Rather than relying on his phone battery, Achilles dug out a camp lantern from one of the boxes, breathing a sigh of relief when it still worked. For how long, he was not sure, but the fact that the light was bright white and did not flicker made it feel a more stable light source than the overhead bulb.

The tunnel only went on for a few feet before it dropped off into stairs, heading downward at such a steep angle Achilles had to duck his head to avoid scraping it on the ceiling. Once the staircase flattened out into another length of tunnel, the ceiling lowered so much that Achilles had to walk with a hunch in his back.

At the beginning of the next set of stairs, the walls changed from cinder block to rock, as if he'd gone from a man-made tunnel into a cave. The stairs were stone rather than concrete, although they had been laid carefully and were even all the way down, signs of construction rather than a natural decline.

Achilles walked for quite some time before realizing with distinct abruptness that the tunnel was becoming narrower. He could not remember

how wide it had been initially, but at the point at which he stopped to observe, his shoulders nearly brushed either side. He had to turn sideways to keep going.

In the lantern-light, he could see the ceiling of the tunnel lowering. Achilles would have to crouch in order to continue on. Past that point, it may have lowered further, and the walls seemed to pull in even more. Achilles, who had not previously been claustrophobic as far as he could tell, desperately did not want to continue.

Reversing his direction back up the tunnel filled him with a deep sense of relief, as though a building dread he had not noticed slowly seeped away the wider and taller the tunnel became and the closer to surface-level he drew.

When he reached the door, he hauled it shut again, threading the chain back through the handle as it once had been, with the padlock still open.

As he clicked off the lightbulb at the foot of the stairs and made his way up, he determined that it was time to be done with avoiding Zagreus.

— — —

Zagreus took Thanatos' advice and read something.

Granted, when Than gave him that advice, he was probably not picturing Zagreus reading Patroclus' romance novel draft, but Zagreus had always gone with what intrigued him when it came to literature and, well.

This was certainly intriguing.

He was curled up in the armchair Patroclus had been sitting in, listening to the rain fall outside, with the notebook on his lap. To Zagreus' credit, he hadn't stolen the book, it had been left *right there* on the footstool, lying open like Patroclus wanted somebody to read through it. Granted, the page that was open was mostly empty, and so Zagreus had to flip through to the beginning, but still. It felt like an open invitation. Pat wouldn't mind. Probably.

He didn't understand the vast majority of what was going on, which came with a slight feeling of chagrin, as the extent of his lack of knowledge about the mortal world was revealed. Despite this being supposedly different from Patroclus' usual historical fiction, it did not take place in the current century, nor did it take place in the same country—continent, even—where Zagreus spent his time on the surface.

There was one thing Zagreus certainly did understand about the book, and that was the mounting tension between the two leads.

Zagreus was not a literary connoisseur but he could see this was brilliantly written. He felt transported, placed directly in the main character's spot. Perhaps that was because the main character spent so much time being cleverly seduced by his love interest and Zagreus, too, wanted a gorgeous man to hesitate for only a moment, look him deep in the eyes, and then pin him against the door of his study and kiss him so deeply he wouldn't have been able to stand were it not for the solid wood behind him and the solid man in front. Zagreus, too, wanted it to get even steamier from there out.

It wasn't just the sex itself that had Zagreus squirming in his seat, a very comfortable kind of uncomfortable. It was the little details, the descriptions of the man's freckled shoulders, his strong, steady hands, his warm lips.

“What about your betrothal to Lady Elaine?” I asked, not certain why I'd even thought of it. His hands spreading my thighs as I sat at the high-backed chair behind his desk certainly ought not to have provoked thoughts of his engagement.

“Oh, I'm sure I will marry Lady Elaine,” Emmett said, crouching low before me, his palm not working at the front of my trousers but just resting there, as if tempting me to push up into his touch. I never was good at avoiding his temptations. “And someday I shall inherit her ailing father's lands and his title and my sons shall go on to inherit those from me. But there's nothing that says I can't suck your cock before that inevitable future comes 'round.”

“Nothing but common decency,” I argued.

He made me quite indecent even whilst I spoke. “I don’t think anybody could accuse you of being decent right now. Not with the way you’re pushing into my hand like that.”

He was right, but I could not stop. His fiancée could appear in the doorway right now and I would keep fucking that tight, warm fist because my body was helpless to do anything else.

Zagreus’ body, he discovered, was helpless to do anything but become completely aroused by the words on the page. There was no hesitation in Patroclus’ lovely script—he wrote these things without pause. Very few words were crossed out, whereas, in the ballroom scene prior, he’d put an X through an entire paragraph and rewritten it.

Zagreus took a peek at the next page, and then the following. Gods. He was pretty sure there were eight straight pages of these two fucking. Else he’d skipped over something between and stumbled into another sex scene.

Given his position in the office, he couldn’t help but imagine this scene taking place right there, at that desk, in that chair. It helped that Emmett was an older man described as having long golden hair. He was far too easy to replace with Achilles in Zagreus’ mind. Zag had sucked Achilles’ cock before—Achilles had never returned the favor, however. He wondered how it would feel.

He settled a hand over his crotch, pushing up into his own touch as helplessly as the protagonist of this story had been doing.

It was dangerous. The door was open, and Achilles had been past here not long ago.

He was too good at this for it to have been his first time. I was too new at this to do anything but squirm in his grasp. His throat was talented but his fingers were better, and I enjoyed the way they slipped lower for a time, playing at opening me.

Eventually, his fingers disappeared. Eventually, I realized why. He’d switched to touching himself, his cock jutting lewdly over the unlaced

fly of his trousers, as I'm sure mine would have been, were it not currently completely swallowed.

He was going to get off on my pleasure.

“Oh gods.” Zagreus forcibly removed his hand from the paper so that he did not wrinkle it in his stress. He tried to swallow the knot in his throat but found himself unable. The front of his shorts were visibly tented now, and he looked back at the page, engrossing himself in Patroclus’ words.

“Having fun there, stranger?”

Of course, it was inevitable that one of them would come across him. This was just how his luck went. Of course it would be Patroclus, who knew exactly what he was reading.

“I. Um. You... you’re a very good writer,” Zagreus said lamely.

Patroclus made his way into the study slowly, letting Zagreus watch his every move. “I think I’ve reached a point in my skill set where it doesn’t feel egotistical to agree with that,” he said, stepping forward, sitting down on the footstool, a reverse of their positions from last time. “But I don’t think I’ve ever seen my work affect somebody like this.”

“I mean, you said you don’t usually write this sort of thing. If people were going around getting hard-ons over your regular work, that might be sort of strange.”

Patroclus gave him an indulgent smile, and plucked up the notebook which Zagreus had propped up to somewhat obscure his erection. “You make a decent point.” He smoothed his hand over the pages, drawing Zagreus’ attention once more to the breadth of his palms. They could easily reenact the scene Zagreus had just been reading. The desk chair was right over there. Zagreus wondered whether he’d like to be the one in it, or the one kneeling. “Well, I seem to have put you in a state. I ought to make it up to you.”

He was staring directly at the state he’d put Zagreus in.

Zagreus, for his part, was having difficulty remembering to breathe, and also found his mouth had dried out. He swallowed, and then he answered. "I think I'd like that very much."

Patroclus' hand settled into his lap with ease and Zagreus jerked under his touch, not away from it but *into* it, his body begging for more.

Naturally, this was when he was walked in on a second time.

It was Achilles, because who else would it be? Zagreus' first thought was that Achilles looked visibly shaken by something. His second was that he hoped Patroclus was blocking Achilles' line of sight to Zagreus' crotch.

"So, did either of you know that was a secret tunnel in the basement?" Achilles asked, which was, at least, very interesting.

11. Claustrophobia & the Confession

Summary for the Chapter:

Zagreus goes spelunking, Achilles and Patroclus talk, things get monstrous.

Notes for the Chapter:

OHOHOHO WE HAVE SOME ACHILLES EXCITEMENT THIS TIME AROUND!

"Past that point, it became too short and too narrow for me to continue," Achilles said. "Well, physically, I probably could have gone a bit further, but..."

"Oh, you didn't *want* to be potentially trapped by a cave-in and die of suffocation or thirst, whichever comes before the other? A wonder," said Patroclus, examining the door that Achilles had slid aside to reveal the tunnel. It looked, as did the rest of the basement, quite nondescript. Patroclus still couldn't believe Achilles had found this tunnel and had immediately thought to go down it in the first place.

Zagreus, who'd gone a distance into the tunnel, trotted back out, lantern in tow. "Yes, it's like you said. I can't find anything interesting about it, except that it goes down, and one wonders why my mother would have need of a tunnel that goes down."

"That is how tunnels usually go, is it not?" asked Patroclus.

"I suppose so. But typically, 'down' means 'the Underworld' and my mother left there for a reason." Zagreus couldn't entirely guess what reason, but he'd assume it had something to do with her husband being the absolute worst. "I would be fine to go down there, though. If I die, popping up at home would be a bit inconvenient, but I could convince Than to take me back here if I asked nicely. Probably."

Patroclus only shook his head, not saying no, just in reaction to Zagreus' general response. "Death is an inconvenience. You're a strange one, Zagreus."

"Indeed, I am." He was bouncing on his toes with the excitement of this underground cave of potential horrors.

"So, what are we meant to do?" Achilles asked. "Wait up here for your return?"

"Something like that." Patroclus moved to pull the dust-cover off an old sofa that was shoved into one corner of the room. "Onward, then, stranger. Let us know what's to be found."

"If I don't come back in a few hours, just assume I'm dead," Zagreus said, giving them a casual wave over his shoulder and heading off into the tunnel. It was a casual declaration that made Patroclus' blood run with fear.

As Zagreus disappeared into the dark, Achilles called out, "*be careful.*"

— — —

"He'll be alright, Achilles," said Patroclus, from his place sitting on the sofa. He was remarkably relaxed, possibly because he didn't truly understand how terribly anxiety-inducing the tunnel was, and Achilles had no inclination to tell him, as it meant Achilles would have to remember.

"I'm not worried," he lied.

"You're pacing."

So he was. He'd not noticed.

He stopped, turned, and collapsed onto the couch next to Patroclus. It creaked terribly under him. Across from him, he could see the weapons Zagreus had left behind sitting up against the wall—a shield and a spear, both as colorful and impossible as Zagreus' red-bladed sword.

"I'm worried," he finally admitted, although Patroclus probably didn't need to hear it to know. Achilles looked at the door to the tunnel, wondering how far Zagreus had made it. "In this world of gods and monsters, I know not what he'll find down there. It had an aura of fear, of dread. I can't describe it. I shouldn't have been so afraid of it, but I couldn't go further."

"If there is anyone to combat fear and dread, I think that would be the man," Patroclus said. "I'm not saying he'll be alright just to comfort you, I'm saying it because it's true."

Achilles lolled his head back against the back of the couch. "Would you say it just to comfort me? If I needed such a thing?"

"You know that I would."

He passed his face over his hand. Much as he wished Patroclus hadn't been dragged into all this, he was deeply glad he had someone around to steady him when things went off-kilter. "You're too good to me, Pat."

"Perhaps."

They were quiet for a long while, staring at the door. Achilles wondered whether Zagreus had reached the point he had not been able to pass. He looked at Pat's face, found him pensive, and wondered what about. Zagreus' fate, most likely.

"Why didn't you ever call?" Patroclus said. Not about Zagreus at all, then.

"You told me to call you when I got my life together," Achilles said. It sounded as lame an excuse as it had when he's given it while a wounded Zagreus slept in the next room. "It wasn't that I didn't want to."

Of course he'd wanted to. He'd wondered if it was the right time at least once a month since the last they'd seen one another, at that sculpture exhibit they'd both coincidentally attended. Achilles had been looking at an enormous, incomprehensible modern art piece painted in shades of blue. Patroclus had appeared in a suit nearly the same color, peacock blue, a perfect tone against his warm skin and dark eyes, looking like a dream.

His eyes had lingered on the lines of Achilles' body. His hands had lingered on the small of Achilles' back. His mouth had lingered on Achilles' name, and then he'd kissed him on the roof of the gallery and kissed him again on his living-room couch and kissed him again in his bed. He hadn't just hooked up with Achilles that night, hadn't just fucked him, he'd made love to him like no time at all had passed. Like they'd never broken up. Like they were still in love.

Maybe they *were* still in love.

"Right. When your divorce was settled, all that. Why didn't you call me then?"

That last night together, Mia had called, asking if Achilles was still at the exhibition. He'd been honest with her to a degree, and had told her he'd gone home with a friend. She was already seeing somebody else, anyhow, and he said as much to Patroclus, but Pat was rightfully concerned that Achilles, freshly separated for not more than a month or so, was not yet prepared to jump back into things where they had left them thirteen years ago.

And he hadn't been, not really. "You deserve someone who's better at being a partner than I am." He swallowed after he said it, as if he could drag the traitorous words back into his throat. There was a truth to them that'd make them go down bitter, though.

"You want to know what I think?" Patroclus asked, looking at Achilles, not directly, but from the corner of his eye.

"How much will it hurt?"

"Not overly much. Achilles, I think you haven't tried being a partner in a while. You said your relationship with Mia was more of a friendly sort of affection, almost businesslike at times. I'm sure I don't need to remind you, that is not how you were with me."

Achilles tried to breathe steadily, leaning on the arm of the couch. He did not look at Patroclus. "Romance itself cannot carry the weight of a

relationship."

"No, indeed. You have to build something deeper." Patroclus' hand rested on Achilles' shoulder, sliding down his bicep and then back up. "We had that. We still could. Achilles, sometimes I feel as if you think you irreparably damaged something when you broke things off with me."

"Didn't I?" he asked, trying to work his mind around the idea that he had not. "Of course I damaged something, I hurt you. It hurt me, too."

"Irreparably damaged, Achilles. It can be healed."

When he finally gathered the courage to look back, Patroclus was turned towards him, smiling at him. It made all the breath rush from his chest.

I still love you, Achilles thought. He didn't quite have the courage to say that.

"I'd like to try," he said instead. "To fix things."

"Good." With this, Patroclus' hand moved to his other shoulder, so that his arm was around Achilles. He wasted no time in pulling Achilles close to him, letting Achilles lay his head on his shoulder. No matter how long it had been, this was a comfort.

Achilles relaxed against him. "I know we have more to talk through, but... might we defer that to a time at which I'm not so focused on whether Zagreus is alright?"

Patroclus rubbed his back, tracing the line of his spine. "I am going to be hard-pressed to find another topic of conversation capable of keeping you out of your worries about Zagreus.

"You're right," Achilles sighed. "I don't know, tell me what you're doing in the library all day."

"Writing."

"I guessed as much."

"Writing romance," Patroclus clarified, which Achilles would not have guessed. When Patroclus was working on his first book, Achilles had suggested that two of the characters seemed like they might make a good couple. Patroclus mildly agreed and then said he was never going to make that happen, because romance was uninteresting for him to read and even more uninteresting to write.

"What brought on that change?" Achilles asked. He wondered if Patroclus had changed those opinions years ago, or if it was a more recent development.

Patroclus' fingers had begun stroking his head, not running through his hair because his curls made that impossible, but massaging his scalp. "Well, you see, I have been trapped in a cabin in the woods with the two most attractive men I have ever known, and I'm not sleeping with either of them."

Quite recent, then. "So it's... frustration?"

"Immense sexual frustration," Patroclus amended. "I'm told it's quite good, although my only audience has been Zagreus, and he doesn't seem to be much of a reader."

"Zagreus has read it?" Achilles turned this idea over in his mind. "You know, I'm honestly surprised the two of you haven't..."

"Not for lack of trying," said Patroclus.

"He's not interested in you?" This was even more surprising.

"No, Achilles. Somebody keeps interrupting us." Patroclus leaned closer, lips brushing Achilles' brow. "But if you wanted to watch, you need only ask."

"*Patroclus*." Achilles tilted his head, knew the right angle to turn so that they could kiss.

Unfortunately, that was when literal hell broke loose.

— — —

The tunnel was dark, but Zagreus himself was a light. Achilles had taken a lantern down with him and suggested Zagreus do the same, but Zagreus needed two hands to wield his sword. Instead, he'd removed his mortal guise entirely, letting his laurels and his footsteps light the way. This had also put him in his usual clothing, which was much easier to move around in.

A staircase ago, though, he'd had to leave the pauldron behind, unable to fit all three skulls through the narrow passageway.

Zagreus wondered if he'd reached the part of the tunnel where Achilles had turned around. He wedged himself in sideways and even still, he had to suck in his breath to get through. The top of the tunnel brushed his head at times, and he was constantly afraid of becoming stuck. If he did, he realized, it may be a more permanent issue, given that he would not die unless the tunnel actually collapsed on him. He wished he'd thought of that before he got into this.

It may have been stupid, but he shut his eyes as he squeezed further into the gap. It was as if seeing the trap he was probably working himself into was what would make him get stuck.

And all right, it sort of helped.

Zagreus felt the tunnel get wider before he saw it. Suddenly, his right hand did not meet the wall when he set it flat in front of him, but empty air, cool and refreshing. The prospect of freedom slowed the fast-paced panic of Zagreus' heart. Even after this, getting through into the wider chamber was a very near thing. The stones scraped at his back and his front as he wedged himself through, and he had to push all his breath out to compress his ribcage as far as it would go.

Once he was in the clear, he shook his head, ridding himself of his prior panic and a small shower of leaves. It was dark as Erebus down here, but not quite so musty, the floor and walls all made of obsidian and crystal, as if the room itself was the inside of a geode. It would have glittered brilliantly if it were better lit, and even the sparks off Zagreus' laurel made it shine.

He ventured on, not to be distracted by pretty scenery, and found more of the same. There was a distant trickle, like a water source from very far away, and Zagreus was distracted enough by the sound of it that he nearly missed the creature coming out of one of the many caverns that branched off from this central room.

It was hard to look at. Not the usual sort of wretch, but certainly wretched, it looked like an amalgamation of the beasts that accosted him in Tartarus stitched together. Orange but sickly, like half a Lout and half a Thug, with the heads of both and four Wringers for arms. Out of its body grew crystals which appeared decorative until they fired beams like Brimstones, and the stone of the room around Zagreus started to crack.

He readied Stygius, but had to dodge before he could strike, an enormous chunk of stone falling from the ceiling and cracking into the floor where he had just stood.

Shit. If this place caved in, fighting would be worthless, he'd just die.

Behind the creature, Zagreus saw another—a different arrangement of wretch-parts, but just as fearsome and twice as big. The Brimstone-crystals shot at Zagreus again, but they did not hit him, having aimed for the walls of the tunnel behind him, vaporizing the small crevice Zagreus had so painstakingly crept through. This made way for several little beasts which skittered like dinner-plate-sized insects along the walls. They were headed up the tunnel, and they'd make their way to Pat and Achilles before Zag did, if he wasn't fast.

Ignoring the wretch-abominations, Zagreus dashed for the tunnel exit, phasing forward in bursts as quickly as he could, wishing desperately for a boon from Hermes. Once given enough room he paused to perform a Supernova, which got rid of a few of the bug-creatures, but even more made their way past Zagreus in the time it took him to strike. Scratch that. He needed to get out of the tunnel, needed to block it off, needed to hope that these creatures did about as well on the surface as any other wretch.

He scrambled up the stairs, no time to slow down but also no time to trip over his own feet, firing Bloodstones at whatever bugs he could hit while he

ran. He rarely had a chance to pick up the Bloodstones, had to wait on them to re-appear in his grasp unless they happened to pop back out in his path.

He had left Achilles and Patroclus with Varatha and Aegis, but still he feared it wouldn't be enough. These creatures were new, he didn't know what they could do, and the multi-wretches were still coming at Zagreus from behind. How many staircases had he gone up to reach this point? How close was he?

Finally, he hit the concrete staircase, the final one before the tunnel that connected to the house. Behind him, the tunnel was swarming with insects and wretches, too many to count, worse than a pile of Numbskulls.

Another Supernova, just as he reached the end of the tunnel, and then he fired all three Bloodstones behind himself, racing through to the other end where, hopefully, Achilles and Patroclus had run.

They hadn't. In fact, Pat was waiting to slam the door shut as soon as Zagreus came through, chaining it up behind him. There was an immediate thump on the other side, and Patroclus clicked the padlock shut.

"What the *hell*—" Achilles shouted, pretty handily dispatching some of the bugs with Varatha, "are those!?"

"I'll tell you when I figure that out!" Zagreus replied, jabbing forward with Stygius, since the crowded basement didn't give him much room to swing. "Pat, will that door hold—?"

"I think," Patroclus replied, which was not deeply reassuring. He was using Aegis not just as a shield, but as a weapon, bludgeoning everything that got near him, just like Zagreus did. The bugs were small enough that one hit from the shield did them in. Thankfully, none of the giant multi-wretches had gotten loose.

Despite being easy to squash, the bugs turned out to have very sharp teeth. Zagreus had hardly noticed them nipping at him, but he'd been hit a few times, and something unpleasant was flooding his veins, flashes of hot and then cold, not the sickly feeling of Satyr poison but poison all the same. His

bloodstones returned to him, and he tossed one at a bug that was getting close to Patroclus.

"Don't let them bite you!" he said, to which Achilles responded with a wild, almost barking laugh.

"It's a bit late for that!"

How badly would this affect a mortal?

Zagreus tried not to wonder as he continued his flurry of attacks. They were slowly going down in number but they were everywhere, on the walls and the ceiling, the basement light so dim it was hard to see them until they moved. Zagreus smashed several boxes of gardening supplies (sorry, Mother) and wasn't sure whether he'd actually squashed any bugs in the attempt.

Achilles seemed to have more and more trouble tracking them, and was growing weary besides, his breath heaving through his chest and his shoulders hunched in a way that looked pained. He couldn't stay down here.

"Patroclus?" Zagreus called, hoping they weren't both hit.

"I'm fine," Patroclus replied, and while that was somewhat of a relief, his panic for Achilles still took up the forefront of his thoughts.

"Get him upstairs," Zagreus ordered. "I'll take care of the rest of these, just make sure he's okay."

Varatha clattered to the ground, but Patroclus kept Aegis, to fend off any further attacks. Zagreus turned to face the rest of the swarm. He heard footsteps going up the stairs and the door swinging open and shut.

Good.

Time to finish exterminating.

— — —

Zagreus had been bitten no less than three more times when he finally determined that the basement was cleared, and although the poison seemed to wear off (not unlike Dionysus' Hangover) he still ached when he hauled himself up the stairs. It wouldn't kill him. Probably.

He was more worried about Achilles, who he found crouched in the center of the living room, with Patroclus leaning over him to examine him, a hand on the center of his back.

"Zagreus," Patroclus said, lifting his head as he heard the door shut and Stygius thump onto the carpet as Zagreus dropped his weapon. "Are you—something's wrong with him."

"Let me see," Zagreus said, staggering only a little as he made his way to Achilles.

Something was wrong with him, indeed.

Achilles had always been unique for a mortal, but he'd been mortal all the same.

Now, he looked hardly mortal at all. Not injured, but transformed. Strange, and wild, and very different from the man he'd been.

His hair hung in his face but beyond it Zagreus could see his eyes turned wider than before, pupils slitted, the green of his irises brighter and the light of the lamp behind Zagreus reflecting off them, making them glow. His mouth was open, his breath coming in ragged pants, and it let Zagreus see the mouthful of jagged teeth Achilles had now, like a shark, large enough to stretch his jaw a bit. When he breathed, slits opened and closed on his neck—gills. His ears had gone pointed like his teeth, pinned back like an animal in pain.

The change in his coloring was the least worrisome by the most substantial. His skin had gone from bronze to green, not in that way mortals said somebody looked green when they were sallow and sick, but almost a blue-green, an ocean-green, mottled over his body. His hair, still gold in some

places, was shot through with the same color, as well as some white, like seafoam.

Zagreus had heard tales of the Nereids, ocean nymphs in the same way Eurydice was a nymph of the forest, but he hadn't seen one until now.

"You... you didn't tell me you weren't human," he said. Not even when Zagreus himself had admitted the same.

Achilles' voice came out in a warbling rasp, like it was muffled by water or by the changes to his throat. "I... didn't... know."

"How wouldn't you...?" Zagreus said, but this line of questioning did not go far.

Achilles made a noise, like a low roar in his chest. He was trembling, not out of pain, Zagreus realized, but out of suppressed energy. He did not know how to control what had become of him. "I need to—" Another roar, deeper, ending on a snarl. He sounded like more of a beast than Cerberus.

His hands, Zagreus realized, had become claws, and they dug into the floor, scoring deep marks like someone had dragged knives across it.

"Outside, then, yes?" Zagreus suggested, because he really did not want to fight Achilles, weakened as he already was.

Achilles nodded. Human speech seemed to be beyond him now.

"*Achilles*," said Patroclus, but Achilles made no response to his name.

"Get the door for him?" Zagreus, did not trust himself to stand.

Patroclus' stricken look resolved itself into something similar to what he'd worn while treating a very injured Zagreus. There was a grim certainty to him, the pressure turning him stony.

He opened the door, and Achilles ran, faster than a man should have been able.

Patroclus looked out after him, and there was a distant splash from outside. "He's jumped in the pond," Pat noted. He sighed, closing the door and then sagging against it. "I think he's alright. Are *you* alright?"

"Healing," said Zagreus. He was, albeit slowly. He was becoming increasingly certain the poison would not kill him. "I... I don't know what to do about Achilles, though."

"I'm at as much a loss as you." He shut his eyes. "God. Just when I think things have gotten as strange as they can."

"Things can always get stranger, Patroclus," Zagreus said, rolling onto his back on the rug, waiting on his body to process all the poison. Any minute now. He hoped.

"Someday, I'd like to just fall for a normal man," Patroclus said. "That would be nice."

Zagreus, regrettably, was too wounded to even appreciate the romantic insinuation in Patroclus' complaints.

12. the Monstrous & the Firebrand

Summary for the Chapter:

Zagreus gets that nereid dick. That's it, that's the chapter.

Notes for the Chapter:

WELCOME friends to part one of the 3-chapter smut-fest!

He called Thanatos about Achilles, because there was really nobody else he could ask. Than was first irritated with him for using Mort too liberally, then irritated with him for going into unknown secret tunnels, and then further incensed when Zagreus suggested going back down again.

"How else are we going to find out what's down there?" Zagreus asked.

"Why do you *need to know*?" Than countered, doing that thing where he floated a few inches higher than usual to make himself appear more intimidating. He'd been doing that trick since they were kids, though, Zagreus wasn't fooled.

"Why not? I'll be fine, maybe you could even convince Charon to let you take some boons to-go for me. Maybe a Hydralite or two. I'll pay him back later."

"Absolutely not." Than pinched the bridge of his nose. "Zagreus. The fact that you are here is already covert, you can't just go poking around." His tone was clipped the way it always was when he was annoyed with Zagreus, but there was none of the coldness he affected when he was truly irate.

Because of this, Zag didn't mind whining, "*Thaaaaannnn*," and dramatically leaning onto him, giving Than pleading eyes like Cerberus begging for a treat.

"No." Thanatos blinked away from Zagreus and reappeared a few feet over, making Zagreus wobble where he stood and almost topple over. "We have more important things to deal with, anyways. You say your friend looks like a nymph?"

And alright, yeah, that was probably more important.

Unfortunately, Achilles could not be convinced to come up for Than to inspect him. The gills he'd grown were quite clearly fully functional, because despite any attempts to get him out, he remained lurking somewhere in the pond. Based on Zagreus' description, Thanatos agreed that Achilles seemed to be at least some part nereid, although what exactly was going on with him was beyond Than without actually seeing him.

Thanatos did not have time to waste while Zagreus coaxed an unwilling Achilles out of hiding, but Zagreus had time in abundance, and spent a long while sitting on the dock at the pond. The water was murky, and he would not be able to see Achilles unless he was very near the surface. Even then, Achilles' current coloring would likely make him impossible to spot until he was very close. He could also be hiding under all the lily pads that grew near the perimeter.

'Murky' was a great improvement upon 'bloody and full of ghostly hands', and even more so on 'red-hot magma' or 'amnesia-inducing mist', so Zagreus had no qualms about sticking his feet in the water. He might even make it a more pleasant temperature.

He couldn't use the rod of fishing, because he was afraid of snagging a fish hook on Achilles, so he just lay back on the dock, kicking his feet in the water, staring up at the clouds blowing across the sky. The sun was setting, and Zagreus watched it darken around him, the stars starting to show overhead. Thankfully it had stopped raining, or this would be an unfortunate chore.

He didn't even know if Achilles could hear him from below the surface, but he spoke as loud and clear as possible, hoping the larger ears Achilles had grown would give him better hearing.

"I hope you're doing alright down there. I know you didn't want to talk to Than earlier—or maybe you just didn't know he was there—but he does honestly want to help. It's hard to find assistance on these kinds of things. No 'care and keeping of sea nymphs' books or anything."

He kicked his feet in the water a little and then stopped, worrying he might miss some splashing of Achilles in the water.

"Are you afraid of scaring us? I've fought much more fearsome things than you with my own two fists. I mean, my own two fists with some knife-covered gloves, but same thing, really."

No response still, but for the croaking of frogs somewhere. Unless Achilles could make frog noises now.

"And if you're going to think something like, 'oh no, I'm hideous now,' I'll have to stop you there, too, because, honestly speaking, you're very attractive like this."

That *did* warrant a response, apparently. There was an enormous splash of water over him as a figure rose out of the pond and braced on the dock, clawed, webbed hands on either side of Zagreus' knees.

"Be careful with what you say, Zagreus."

His voice was even further distorted, the normal softness of it taking a backseat now to the churning growl that overlaid it. His appearance had changed, too, less human, his ears having gained a spiny web at the ends like a fish's tail and his skin turned scaly. It was hard to tell in the moonlight, but his hair looked more silver than gold.

"Oh. I do not take it back," said Zagreus, plucking at the soaked hem of his t-shirt where it clung to his stomach.

Achilles' eyes were still blue-green, but the whites had gone so dark as to almost appear black, and they reflected the light of the moon. "Go back into the house. You do not want to be around me at present."

The wood of the dock was creaking, Zagreus realized, under Achilles' hands. So this transformation did not only come with a change of appearance, but with strength. Interesting.

"I think I do," he said, not trying to hide that he was shifting his hips.

Achilles let out an animalistic huff of breath. "Zagreus," he said again, and before he could entreat Zagreus once more to leave, Zag sat up, grasping Achilles' face in his hands.

"I want you," he said. "Like this. And all the time, but especially like this."

Achilles was missing his shirt, and possibly the rest of his clothing, it was difficult to tell. A line of water ran down the center of his chest, its path interrupted by the bumps of the scales that now covered his skin. He seemed like he had grown larger, the breadth of his shoulders wider than it had been, or perhaps that was just the effect of being prone beneath him when he was a snarling beast rather than a soft-voiced man.

"Zagreus," he said a third time, a little less growly, a little more human. "I am afraid that I will not be able to stop myself."

"Then don't try to. I don't want you to stop yourself, I want you to *fuck me*."

That landed him flat on his back with Achilles fully on top of him, soaking wet and definitely, definitely larger than he had been. Also definitely naked.

Achilles' kiss was a clash of teeth. He had either more of them than usual or his teeth were larger than usual, and it bloodied Zagreus' lower lip and made him no less eager for it. The pond was not salt water but Achilles smelled like the sea, sharp and a little metallic, something earthy beneath it.

The water that dripped from him was cold, but Achilles' skin was hot against Zagreus'. As Achilles pulled back, Zag's laurel gave off sparks, the yellow-orange fire making the scales on Achilles' skin glimmer. Zagreus was not-so-surreptitiously trying to look between Achilles' legs, but Achilles' bulk still weighed him down.

Achilles licked over the place on Zagreus' lower lip where he'd drawn blood. "I can feel you shaking," he said, the sub-vocal thrum back. His teeth made his words slur a little around them, some of his consonants turning blurry.

"I'm not afraid," Zagreus clarified.

"I know," Achilles said. His face was nestled against Zagreus' neck now, his breath hot against Zagreus' skin. "I can sense these things a little better now, I think. Especially for those I share a... connection with."

"Can you?"

"Mm." When he hummed, Zagreus could feel his chest rumble like a cat purring. "Although, there is also additional evidence that this is arousal, not fear." His hand cupped over said additional evidence—Zagreus' cock, hard in his shorts—and Zagreus rocked up into his touch.

For a long moment, he just looked at Zagreus, his head cocked, considering. Water dripped from Achilles' hair onto Zagreus' face, landing on his cheek and nose, in his open mouth. He was beautiful in an unearthly way now, and Zagreus, who was also an unearthly thing, thought Achilles may damn well be the most gorgeous creature he'd ever seen.

"Undress yourself for me."

Stripping out of wet clothes was a challenge when Zagreus *wasn't* beneath an enormous fish-man, but he struggled out of his T-shirt and shorts as fast as he could. No sooner than he'd tossed them back to the shore, Achilles tugged him in again, his claws gripping tight enough to Zagreus' hip to leave little red score-marks. He kissed Zagreus' mouth only for a moment before detouring to his neck. Gods, his *teeth*.

"Oh! Yeah, *hard*, like that." Zagreus liked the sharp bloom of pain, something he'd never felt with him before because Achilles was so gentle and sweet. He scraped his teeth over Zagreus' throat, more of that low rumbling in his chest, and Zagreus arched beneath him, trying to press into his touch, but Achilles held him down, claws pricking again.

Fine, Zagreus would work for it, then. He reached for Achilles while Achilles buried his face in the other side of Zagreus' neck. The only problem was that Achilles was built on a much larger scale than a mortal man, now, and Zagreus could only reach his waist. "Please, sir, let me touch your cock—agh!"

He was shoved flat to the dock again by Achilles' hand on his chest, which slid up to grasp him tighter. His hand was big enough that his thumb and fingers could easily span Zagreus' throat even when his palm sat on Zag's collarbone. Struggling against it didn't cut off his breath, but there was a pressure to it that had Zagreus struggling in Achilles' grasp and squirming up to frot against him at once.

"Keep still. Let me take my fill of you. Of all the things I didn't let myself do when I had you the first time."

"Oh?" Zagreus did his best to obey, but Achilles' mouth was making its way over his chest, hot breath and a warm tongue, cool night air over the wetness after.

"I did not let myself mark you." Achilles shifted, putting one knee between Zagreus', grinding down against his thigh—

Oh fuck it was huge.

Huge and wet, slick like he'd used maybe a little too much lube, but of course that could come from nothing but his own body.

"I did not admit how much I wanted you to be mine." The low roughness to his voice peaked on this, and Zagreus set a hand on his chest to feel the rumbling through it.

"I am yours, Achilles."

"You will be." Achilles bit down again, pressing a perfect ring of teeth-marks into Zagreus' pectoral. "Get yourself as ready for me as you can. Once I am in you, I will not stop."

"Yes, sir," Zagreus gasped, and this time, Achilles did allow Zagreus to reach down and stroke his cock. It felt inhuman, too, ridges along the edges—those were going to keep Achilles inside him. His opposite hand petted over Achilles' side, but he drew it away when he felt Achilles' gills flare under his fingertips, not sure if touching them was good. He got a handful of Achilles' chest instead, that was probably safe.

The slickness that covered Achilles' cock was a little stickier than lube, a little thicker, but it would ease the way well enough. He wasted no time in driving two fingers into himself, then three, because he was gonna need it. Achilles ground against his thigh again, that rumbling in his chest pitching higher and lower, and Zagreus eagerly awaited the moment Achilles' patience would break.

That moment came sooner rather than later. Achilles nipped him on his chest again, his hand squeezing a little higher up on Zagreus' throat for just a moment before dropping onto the dock behind him so that Achilles could hold himself up. "Now. I'll have you now."

Not *I want you*, not even *I need you*, but *I'll have you*, like Zagreus couldn't tell him to hold off even if he wanted to.

Of course, he didn't want to. He wanted Achilles in him *now*, and Achilles seemed obliging.

His first thrust made Zagreus realize no, he really hadn't had enough preparation. Human Achilles would never have allowed that to happen, would have spent long minutes getting Zagreus ready. The burning stretch only served to remind Zagreus that no, this was a different Achilles, and it made him even hotter, his legs wrapping as tight around Achilles' waist as they could go.

Even a few minutes of being fucked on this was going to have Zagreus feeling overwhelmed, but he loved every moment of it, filled with more than he'd ever taken before, pushed to his limits.

And his cock was *moving* in Zagreus, more than a cock was supposed to be able to, almost like he was being fingered. It meant Achilles could rub his

prostate constantly, *god* it was so *much*. He was constantly dripping more wetness, and Zagreus could feel it sliding out of him, slicking over his thighs and his balls.

The water still clinging to Achilles' scales turned to steam when it dripped onto Zagreus' feet and his cock. He wondered if Achilles had even noticed that it glowed when he wasn't disguised as a mortal.

Achilles continued to mouth at his chest, running his teeth over Zagreus' skin instead of biting down. Even that was going to leave marks, sharp as they were. His sub-vocal rumbling had reached new depths—or heights? Either way, Zagreus couldn't hear him, his voice having gone out of Zag's range of hearing. He could feel it, though, in Achilles' chest and his throat and his belly, even.

"I can sense you even when you're in the house," he said. "I can sense both of you. It's like an instinct. I know what you feel."

"You... you can sense Patroclus?"

"Yes." This seemed to rile Achilles up, he went from staying fully seated and relying on his prehensile cock to tease Zagreus to fully fucking him, pulling out almost far enough to slip out entirely, but always thrusting in to the hilt. The ridges on his cock meant he stretched Zagreus further on exit, and Zag's toes curled. "I can feel him."

"What... what do you mean?"

"I can *feel him*." Achilles repeated, which helped very little. All Zagreus was gathering from this was that he was definitely still into Patroclus.

"You'll have to be a little more transparent—ah! Achilles, it feels too good, I can't think—"

"He's doing this." Achilles punctuated with another thrust, which would have shoved Zagreus further up the dock if Achilles didn't have a hand solidly on his hip.

"Wait—you mean Pat's...?"

"I can feel his *pleasure*."

If what Achilles said was to be believed (and he didn't seem to have the capacity nor the need to make things up just to turn Zagures on right now)...
"He's touching himself?"

"Yes." Oh, gods, if Achilles retained this ability, Zag might have some issues next time he decided to take a bath.

For now, though, it was hot as hell. "Bet he's thinking of you."

Achilles made this strange sort of trilling noise, his eyes rolling back. His claws dug into the wood by Zagreus' head on both sides—he'd let go of Zag's hip.

Zagreus had to brace himself, his hands going between two of the slats of the dock, pushing down hard because Achilles was damn near intent on fucking him through the dock itself. Zagreus just had to *hang on*, his ankles crossed behind Achilles' back, his fingernails digging into the wood, his hips pushing into every thrust, until Achilles thrust in deep, his cock curling hard against Zagreus' prostate, and Zagreus came between their bellies with a flare of his laurels and a scream that Patroclus was definitely going to hear back at the house.

He wondered if Achilles would be able to tell when Patroclus came.

Achilles didn't seem interested in or capable of giving Zagreus much more detail on what Patroclus was up to, still fucking Zagreus through his orgasm and on into the oversensitive mess Zagreus melted into after. Zagreus had known that if he came first, Achilles wasn't going to stop, but *feeling* it was a different thing.

Zag lost his grip on the dock, going completely boneless with his orgasm, but Achilles kept him firmly in place. He reared up, onto his knees, taking Zagreus' waist with both hands and pulling Zagreus back onto his cock with every thrust forward.

He was being well and completely used, and he was loving it.

He was worried that with the copious amount of lubricant Achilles' cock produced, he wouldn't be able to tell when Achilles came. This was not an issue. Achilles *roared* when he came, and if Patroclus hadn't heard Zagreus, he definitely heard that. And he came a *lot*, enough that it covered Zagreus' inner thighs when he pulled out.

He felt completely debauched and he was sure he looked it, too, glassy-eyed and panting, the smear of his own come on his stomach appearing absolutely inconsequential in comparison to the streaks of Achilles' down his thighs. He was covered in little marks, flushed, still giving off sparks, and stretched wide from Achilles' cock.

And he felt *incredible*.

"Zagreus—" Achilles' eyes were panicked, a little more human.

"Achilles, it was *good*. Oh fuck, so good."

"I shouldn't have—" He was shirking back, about to slip beneath the water again.

Zagreus grasped both sides of his face, holding him in place as much as he could, given that Achilles had well and truly worn him out. "You absolutely should have. And you should do it again."

Achilles shook his head. "But you..."

Alright. Zagreus rocked up into a sitting position, and kissed Achilles hard, dirty, giving him a bite to his lower lip to match Zagreus' own. "I like it hard," he said, still holding Achilles as close as he could. "I like to be taken apart like that. I wanted you to destroy me, and I got what I wanted. I can still feel your come inside me, and if I wasn't so damn perfectly exhausted, it'd make me want you to fill me up again. Do you understand that?"

Achilles was shaking his head, but he was also smiling. "Go back to the house before I try it again, then."

"Yes, alright. Goodnight, Achilles."

This time, he felt satisfied with letting Achilles sink back below the surface.

Zagreus was a little unsteady when he staggered back to the house, and quite sore. He'd had to wipe himself down with his shirt before he could put his shorts back on, and even then, he still felt a bit sticky between his thighs from Achilles' come. He stretched as he walked, tilting his head from side to side, feeling the pull of abused skin on his neck where Achilles had bitten down. He had more marks on his chest and his hip and everywhere those sharp teeth dug in.

It was a pleasant sort of soreness, particularly the ache between his legs. He couldn't wait until he got the chance to do it again.

He opened the door slowly to try to keep it from creaking and slipped through, turning the handle before pulling it shut so that the latch would not click. This was all, as he soon realized, deeply unnecessary, because Patroclus was waiting in the kitchen, having finished whatever Achilles had sensed him doing.

Well, not waiting. He was looking through the fridge, and probably not anticipating Zagreus' return. He shut the fridge door as soon as Zagreus entered, leaning against the counter with his arms folded over his chest, his eyes making a very slow path down Zagreus' naked torso and back up again.

"So, I take it Achilles is still...?" he asked, while Zagreus draped his soaked T-shirt over one of the barstools.

"Still a grumpy fish man, yes." He turned around to show Patroclus his back, the score-lines from Achilles' claws going down his hips. "And he bites."

He couldn't quite tell whether the intake of breath through Patroclus' teeth was a good thing. He walked around the counter, placing his hands gently on one of the bruises, the one at the junction of his neck and shoulder. "Need I even ask how you feel about biting, Zagreus?"

"I asked him to."

"I thought so." He inclined his head, kissing the mark, the scrape of his beard all the more pronounced on already-raw skin. Zagreus put his hands on Patroclus' chest and he continued up, the side of Zagreus' neck and then just below his ear. One of his hands pressed against the bite mark on Zagreus' hip, a new white-hot bloom of pain over what had turned into a dull, warm ache, the other at the small of his back, drawing Zagreus closer.

"Achilles said... while we were out there, you were doing the same in here," he said, and Patroclus hummed a questioning noise against his jaw. "He said you were getting off. No idea how he could sense it, it was almost like he could smell you." As Zagreus clarified, Patroclus drew back, a smile slowly crossing his face.

"He was right. I was thinking of what the two of you were doing out there," he said. "Oh, you liked that."

This, he noted because Zagreus pressed himself closer and maybe trembled a little bit at those words. If only he could have the both of them together, one at his back and one at his front, but Achilles barely trusted himself around Zagreus right now and he certainly would not trust himself around Patroclus.

"Come up to bed with me?" Patroclus asked, the hand on Zagreus' lower back holding him closer than the two of them had ever been, his thigh practically between Zagreus' legs. This was what Zagreus had been wanting that very first night when he told Patroclus he'd get in his lap.

He was also extremely sore and his desire as sated as could be, for now. He dropped his hands, holding onto Patroclus' waist, and leaned a little heavier against him, his head on Pat's shoulder. "I hate to admit this, but I think Achilles has exhausted me," he said.

Patroclus' hand fell gentle and firm on the back of his neck. "He does tend to do that, yes." He stroked up through Zagreus' hair until he met his laurel, then back down, holding onto his neck again. "I expect it's particularly

potent now. Come to bed with me anyway. We'll sleep, and come morning, you can reenact on me everything that man did to you."

"I don't think I can bite that hard, actually."

"I'm quite alright with that, I don't think I have your proclivity toward being bitten, anyway."

Notes for the Chapter:

[Accompanying illustration for this chapter!](#)

13. the Recovery & the Sunrise

Summary for the Chapter:

Patroclus and Zagreus wake up together and enjoy the morning aftermath of Zagreus' wild night with Achilles.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey folks, it's been a while! We have reached part 2 of the 3-chapter smut-fest, ft. Pat/Zag! Plus, Achilles' thoughts on the morning after and an answer to the all-important question: is a nereid blowing your back out considered a date?

Patroclus woke a little overheated, and he realized this was because of Zagreus in his bed. His feet did indeed warm the whole of it.

He slept close to Patroclus' side, on his stomach with one hand curled prettily next to his lips and the other shoved somewhere beneath the pillow. All around them were scattered leaves from Zagreus' laurel, probably a half-dozen of them nestled somewhere within the sheets and a handful more spread out across the pillows.

Zagreus, he realized, was not breathing slow enough to be asleep.

Patroclus turned onto his side, pressing his mouth close to Zagreus' ear. "Good morning."

His eyes opened, and Patroclus was once again struck by the ruby color of his right one, standing stark against the black. Everything unnatural about Zagreus was beautiful.

Everything natural about him was beautiful too, after all, Patroclus did not choose to write about smatterings of freckles or dark lashes from an uninspired perspective. The marks Achilles had left on his body were fading already, looking more like three-day-old bruises than fresh bites from only hours ago.

"I'm not tired anymore," was how he greeted Patroclus, giving him only a second's notice before lunging in to kiss him.

He'd only kissed Zagreus the once, sloppy and drunk, because Zagreus wanted somebody to kiss. This was not the same. Now, he kissed because he wanted more.

He rolled astride Patroclus, although he could not truly feel Zagreus against him, wound up in the blankets as they were. Zagreus had stripped down completely before getting in bed, Achilles having thoroughly soaked him with pond water and god-knows-what-else, and Patroclus' hands fumbled with the blankets knowing that, somewhere within them, Zagreus was naked.

It was a difficult task, what with Zagreus fervently attempting to put his tongue in Patroclus' mouth. That took nearly all Pat's focus, and his hands were wont to spread out over Zagreus' back or hold his head in place, not to busy themselves with such non-Zagreus things as *sheets*.

Yes. Yes, this was how he'd wanted this man, breathless and heavy atop him, his kisses messy not out of a liquored tongue but because he was too overcome by passion.

Zagreus was hard already when Patroclus finally unwrapped him from the confines of the bedsheets. He was hard, and his cock was also glowing just as fire-bright as the soles of his feet did, and, well, that was new.

"So, um, I may have had additional interest in... your thoughts on my feet," Zagreus said.

"I see." He wanted to see this in the dark, wondered if it'd light up the night the way Zag's feet did.

"Do you want to feel if it's just as warm as my feet are?" This was accompanied with a cheeky smile, his tongue poking out from between his teeth.

He had absolutely no need to answer that with anything other than his hand around Zagreus' cock.

It was just as warm. Hotter, maybe.

"I want this inside me."

Zagreus swore, a frankly excessive: "*blood and fucking darkness, gods, yes, fuck—fuuck, yes.*" Some of the latter sounded more like a moan. This was because Patroclus was still stroking his cock.

"Something tells me you like the idea of that."

"*Please*, sir, I need you—" He paused after this, like he'd halted in his tracks. "Sorry. I shouldn't have. Uh. I call Achilles that—*called* Achilles that."

Damn. Achilles had gotten kinkier since Patroclus last saw him. He wouldn't have thought Achilles had it in him.

More importantly. "Oh, you can call me that if you like," he said. "The only condition is: if you're going to call me 'sir,' that means you must agree to take orders from me. Yes?"

"Oh, yes *sir*."

"There's a good boy," he replied indulgently, accompanying it with a squeeze to Zagreus' cock. "Now. I believe you planned ahead, somewhat?"

Zagreus had brought his backpack up to Patroclus' room before he got in bed with him. Patroclus was also pretty damn sure Zagreus' backpack was the only place anyone was storing lube in this whole damn house. Patroclus had been unfortunately without any of his possessions, and he doubted Achilles included such things when he was panic-packing.

He removed his hand from Zagreus' cock, lifting the covers up to let him out. Zagreus didn't need to be told to dart out from beneath them, snatching up his backpack along the way. He knew immediately what pocket to reach into and came back with a tube of lube that was almost hilariously ordinary

for something that had come from the hand of a god. It was messy around the cap when he thumbed it open, like he forgot to wipe it off.

"I don't have any condoms," he said. "But, um, it's not really necessary. I'm a god."

"I'm not worried," Patroclus said. "Honestly, I'm mostly glad I don't have to consider whether latex stands up to heat."

Zagreus laughed, and then laughed again when Patroclus kissed the dimple that formed at the corner of his mouth. He really was sweet, this strange god of nothing. Patroclus wanted to indulge in that sweetness, taste Zagreus on his tongue all day. He met Patroclus' mouth for another kiss, slower this time, his heated passion fading into something truly erotic.

The things this boy could do with his tongue.

"How do you want to have me?" he asked as he pulled away, leaving with a little nip to Patroclus' lower lip.

"Are you quite certain you're not the god of seduction?"

Zagreus took the non-sequitur in stride, his nose wrinkling. "He's my third-cousin once removed. I think."

"You think'?"

"Well, yes. Is 'seduction' a part of Eros' domain, is he actually my third-cousin once removed, what exactly is a third-cousin once removed? I suppose he's also just my cousin's son, on his father's side." Zagreus went on this mostly nonsensical rant while pressing Patroclus back into the bed, situating himself between his legs. "Godly family trees, you know. How do you *want* this, Patroclus."

"Ha. I don't think I do know. About the godly family trees, not about how I want it. That, I'm very aware of," he said, spreading lube over his fingers, reaching between his legs as he spoke, trying to keep his tone even as could be. This was difficult, if only because Zagreus was looking at him with the

kind of hunger nobody had faced Patroclus with in a long while. "I want you to listen to what I tell you, Zagreus."

"Anything, sir," he breathed. His eyes dragged from Patroclus' face down his body, stopping and focusing on Patroclus' fingers as he fucked himself open. "Just tell me what you like."

"Good. I like it hard, I like it deep, but I like to *take my time*. So you're going to fuck me nice and slow, let me feel all the heat of that absolutely ludicrous fire-cock of yours. Yes?"

Zagreus gave a little breathless laugh. "I can do hard, and slow probably. Can't do deep."

This was true enough. Zagreus' frame was smaller than his own and even then his cock wasn't very large. "Oh, you'll get deep enough. The point is, I want you to move when I tell you to. Keep things slow and steady. Can you do that?"

"I'll try, sir." He said it like he wasn't certain whether he'd succeed.

"If you fail, I'll simply knock you over and ride you at whichever pace I choose," Patroclus said. Zagreus smiled like this was not a threat, but a reassurance.

"Whenever you're ready, sir."

"Oh, I'm ready." He pulled his fingers out—he wouldn't need much preparation to take Zagreus, anyway. And despite asking for it slow, Patroclus also wanted it *now*.

Patroclus felt the heat of him over the curve of his ass first, Zagreus' cock brushing his skin as he situated himself between Patroclus' legs. Then that heat was pressing to his rim. It wasn't too hot, and he found himself relaxing into Zagreus' touch. Nothing more than some ordinary temperature play.

Except that this wasn't just a toy built to be heated, it was living flesh, and so it was immensely more pleasant than anything he was used to.

Zagreus obediently moved slowly, filling him in increments, giving a guttural noise as he was fully seated. He made like he was going to pull back, until Patroclus gave him pause.

"Stop. Just stay here for a moment. Let me feel it."

"The heat doesn't bother you?" Zagreus asked.

He shook his head. "It's pleasant. I don't mind." He hummed, enjoying the slide of Zagreus' hands going up his ribcage and over his pectorals, squeezing there, just a little before drawing back. "Can you control the heat? I've seen your feet make water steam."

"I, ah... I just sort of respond to, you know," he said, which was not an answer at all. "I won't hurt living things. Although I still burn the grass sometimes." He shivered in place, his hips wiggling just the slightest bit. "Sir, please, can I move?"

"I'll tell you when you can move. Patience, my dear."

Zagreus moaned more in frustration than in arousal, his chin dropping to his chest. "Can't, sir. *Please*."

"Oh, but you are a prince, aren't you," Patroclus reminded himself. "Used to getting your way."

"Hah. No. I mean, yes, I'm a prince. No, I don't get my way."

"Then you ought to be more content with denying yourself a little longer." Patroclus squeezed his thighs around Zagreus' hips. If he dropped his feet, he could feel Zagreus' burning calves underneath his toes. "I promise it only makes the reward sweeter."

Zagreus whined, drawing his lower lip between his teeth. He was biting it so hard it looked as if it may bleed.

"Now, Zagreus. You don't need more marks." Patroclus reached up, sliding his thumb over Zagreus' lower lip, freeing it from between his teeth. "Let's give you something else to do with your mouth, yes?"

When he pushed his first two fingers past Zagreus' lips, Zagreus bucked against him, but kept himself from pulling back far enough to turn it into a real thrust.

"Slipping up, there," Patroclus noted. "It's alright, though. You handled it well."

Zagreus made a muffled noise around his fingers, his tongue stroking over them, practiced in a way that made Patroclus certain that Zagreus had an oral fixation.

"There. Isn't that better? You're quite good with your tongue, aren't you? I'd bet you'd suck cock beautifully."

Another whine. Patroclus could see Zagreus' abdomen flex as he fought to keep still.

Oh, he really ought to stop denying the boy. "You've done well," he said. "Let's see you fuck me, then. Slow. Push as deep as you can when you—yes, *there*." His cock was short, but not so much so that the burning head of it didn't push against Patroclus' prostate when he was fully seated. And that was a feeling he appreciated.

Zagreus took Patroclus' wrist, tugging a little, enough that Patroclus got the hint and removed his fingers from his mouth. "Sorry," Zagreus said immediately. "Couldn't focus with you... yeah."

He stopped because he needed to *focus*. How dear, this god of theirs. "Keep going," Patroclus told him.

"Is it... am I good?" Zagreus' voice was already strained, and on his next thrust in, he gave a little whiny huff, like someone was fucking *him*. If only Achilles... No, he couldn't distract himself with worry—Zagreus and

Thanatos both had made it seem that Achilles was going to be fine. Going to turn back to his usual self.

"Very good," Patroclus reassured him, stroking his cheek and his neck.

Zagreus kept a slow pace, as slow as he seemed to be able, but eventually Patroclus realized he was not monitoring him, distracted in a way he ordinarily wasn't during sex. At least not this early on. It was overwhelmingly good, the heat of him such a *different* feeling.

"Slow," he reminded him, and Zagreus immediately obeyed, not just slowing, but stopping.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. Patroclus expected something like '*I couldn't help myself,*' but Zagreus said, "you seemed like you were having fun."

"Well, yes. Yes, I was."

"Then... ought I keep going like this?" he thrust hard, once, to demonstrate.

"Keep going," Patroclus said. "I'll play with teasing you some other time, just... just fuck me, Zagreus."

"I'll hold you to that, sir," Zagreus said, with a handsome twist of a grin.

He leaned in, then, kissing Patroclus' chest and then pulling him into another kiss, rocking into him harder, grinding as much as he was fucking Patroclus. The pressure it put on Patroclus' cock was incredible, as were the little noises Zagreus made into their kiss and then when he pulled away, soft cries that emphasized Patroclus' need to hear what he sounded like when he bottomed, sometime.

It was more deeply intimate than Patroclus expected it to be. Zagreus pressed his forehead to Patroclus' chest, whispered a soft, "*yes, that's nice,*" when Patroclus settled a hand at the back of his neck, stroking the hair at his nape. In petting through his hair, Patroclus' fingers brushed the leaves of the laurel he wore, which also radiated the same warmth as his feet and his

cock, which Patroclus could not stop thinking about. He briefly noted that it felt like Zagreus' raven-black hair had absorbed sunlight-heat.

"Did you get... warmer?" he asked, which was the more important question.

"I'm close," Zagreus said, like it was an apology and not an explanation. "Do you need me to pull out?"

His thighs tensed reflexively around Zagreus' waist. "Absolutely not." The heat was intense but not overwhelming, not enough to hurt him. "I didn't mean that... I like it. The heat. It's... you're good."

Zagreus hummed and gave him another kiss. "You're good, too," he said. "You feel so—ah!"

He provided no finish to that sentence, but Patroclus didn't need one. He just needed *more*. "Don't stop."

"Sir, please—" Zagreus buried his face in Patroclus' chest again, breathing too hard to complete his sentence. "Can I come?"

So Patroclus' play at dominating him had not entirely failed. He hummed, as if considering saying no.

"*Please*," Zagreus said again, a hitch in his voice, almost like he might cry. Oh, Patroclus wanted to make him cry.

Patroclus wanted to make him come more, though.

"Yes, Zagreus. Let me have you."

"Oh!" Zagreus' fingers tightened where he clutched Patroclus' hip, his thrusts going jerky and unsteady. He exhaled a breathless sob against Patroclus' chest. Making home come and making him cry were not mutually exclusive, Patroclus determined. "Thank you, I—*ah, fuck.*"

It was that warmth again, filling him in a rush. Little sparks dropped against his skin—Zagreus shed those damn leaves all over the house but he seemed

to throw off more of them when he was particularly emotional—and heat filled him as Zagreus spilled inside him.

He settled fully against Patroclus for a moment afterward, and it was only when Patroclus rocked a little to grind against his stomach that Zagreus seemed to realize he'd yet to finish. "Oh, Pat, sorry, I didn't last very long, hah."

"I don't mind. I'm sure I have some creative ways to ensure that doesn't happen again." He couldn't help the frustrated little noise that accompanied it. "For now, though, could you—"

"Absolutely," Zagreus said, grinning at him and then climbing up off him. "Mind if I—?"

He was kneeling between Patroclus' legs and tucking one of the shaggy, longer strands of his hair behind his ear, so there was little else he could have been asking, but Patroclus asked him to elaborate anyway. He used to do this to Achilles, make him say all those dirty words Achilles normally didn't incorporate into his vocabulary. "Mind if you what?"

"I was planning to suck your cock while I fuck you on my fingers, if that's alright with you." He said it with complete confidence, like he knew he was not going to be turned down.

"If that's 'alright'," Patroclus laughed. "Yes, do that."

He started with his fingers, and while they didn't bear the blood-warming heat of his cock, he was able to be much more precise this way and he took advantage of this. "You know, the first thing I did to Achilles was use my mouth on him," he said, casually, as if that admission didn't make Patroclus groan and turn his head to bury his face in the pillow. "Well, actually the first thing I did to him was sext him for a few months, but this is the first thing I did to him in person."

Patroclus still could not believe Achilles managed to go so long without meeting Zagreus in person. Especially when his mouth felt like *that*.

There was no hesitation in it—Zagreus could take all of him at once and he knew it. This was a feat Patroclus was impressed by, especially since his timing was so impressive, Patroclus' cock fucking into Zagreus' throat while his fingers curled up into his prostate.

"God." It was an expletive, but it was directed at this man, too. "*Zagreus.*"

Zagreus made a noise that may have been a chuckle or a moan—all Patroclus knew was that the way it felt around his cock was *perfect*, was *enough*.

He really had been needing this. He came so hard his head went fuzzy and his ears popped, and when his attention returned to the present, Zagreus was swallowing the last of it and grinning at him again.

"Gods, Patroclus, I really hope you meant what you said about doing all this again." His voice was husky from Patroclus' cock in his throat, a little more aroused than satiated. When Patroclus glanced down, he found Zagreus' cock starting to harden again.

"Immediately, I see."

"Oh! No, I don't need..." Zagreus chuckled, flopping down onto the bed next to him. "I just... am like this, sometimes. Godly libido, and all that."

"I don't mind." Patroclus turned onto his side, his back to Zagreus' front—fucking again was a little much for first thing in the morning, but letting Zagreus put his cock between Patroclus' thighs, the space already wet from a little too much lube and Zagreus' come having been fucked out of him when Zagreus fingered him. "After you treated me so well, Zagreus, it is truly the least I can do."

"Thank you," he said again. Zagreus was a little too small in comparison to Patroclus for this position to work as Patroclus had imagined it. He couldn't turn around and kiss him. But Zagreus kissed his shoulder, put his arms around Patroclus' chest, squeezing his pectorals, feeling him up. "You make me feel. Just. Ugh, it sound silly."

"Tell me," Patroclus said, laying a hand over Zagreus' own on his chest.

"You make me feel *worshipped*," Zagreus said, and of course this would mean so much more to the *literal god* who was fucking his thighs, his cock hot like a firebrand between Patroclus' legs. "I don't know. I just... *oh*, it just feels so good. Gonna... yeah." The next thing he said was mumbled because he smushed his face into Patroclus' shoulder, but he thought it was, "*gonna come again.*"

"Yes, good," Patroclus praised him, pulling away from him as soon as he'd stilled to kiss him again. "Good boy." That last bit made Zagreus shiver against him.

He was trying to talk but he was also trying to kiss Patroclus, and Patroclus thought Zagreus was thanking him again.

Patroclus was the first one to struggle out of bed to get the two of them cleaned off, and he was not bothered by this fact, telling Zagreus to stay right where he was at.

"I ought to attend to my god," he said.

Zagreus pressed a hand over his mouth. Then he said, "stop that, seriously, I'll get hard again."

"Are you *absolutely sure* you're not the god of some kind of sex," Patroclus asked, making good on his promise to attend to Zagreus.

"It's not... it's not *inherently* sexual, Pat, but you did just have sex with me, so." Zagreus sighed, his arms going over his head as he settled back into the bed. "I don't know. No other mortals—no other humans know I exist. So I truly don't know. All I know is that it felt good."

Patroclus grasped his chin to pull him into another brief kiss. "That's all I want," he said. "For you to feel good."

"You're achieving that, then," Zagreus said. "I feel fantastic, actually. Might be a little beyond your goals."

Patroclus laughed, and could not resist ruffling Zagreus' hair. "Stay here and rest for a moment," he said. "I'm getting in the shower."

Zagreus turned his head into the pillows, making some noise of agreement, and Patroclus drew the blanket over him.

Not that he'd need it. Zagreus was warm enough.

— — —

Zagreus traded Patroclus for the shower before going down to the pond to check on Achilles again, hoping that the water would wash away anything of Patroclus that Achilles might sense on him. Then again, it wasn't as if Achilles was exactly *smelling* him the night before, more like a divine sense of Patroclus' emotional state. Zagreus would have sworn Nyx had the same thing for him, but perhaps that was less magical and more just a sort-of-mother's intuition.

When he got downstairs, he realized Achilles was no longer in the pond.

He was in the living room instead, curled up in an unseasonably large blanket on the couch, his hair the only feature that made it entirely clear that this was Achilles. That, and the fact that the only other occupant of the house was in the kitchen, doing something or another, because 'something or another' seemed to be most of what Patroclus did in the kitchen.

Achilles' hair was no longer streaked with color that made it look more like seafoam than hair, which Zagreus thought was probably a good sign. It was difficult to tell under the blanket, but he may have reverted to being his original size, too.

"Achilles?" He took careful steps closer, in case Achilles was asleep.

His head lifted as soon as Zagreus spoke, however. He looked very much himself, perhaps a little tired, but not like a nereid. His cheeks colored very red the longer he looked at Zagreus, and he struggled to sit up, apparently exhausted by the transformation. "Lad, I... you've no idea how sorry I am," he began immediately, which just wouldn't do at all.

"Sorry for what? For giving me the absolute time of my life? For fucking me so thoroughly you've ruined me for, well, for most mortal men?"

This last comment made Patroclus laugh.

"For hurting me? Because, Achilles, I asked you to. And it doesn't stick around." He tugged at the neckline of his shirt, showing where marks would have been left, if they stayed. The night's rest and Patroclus' care and probably the shower had rid him of them entirely.

"For... well, I suppose I intended to apologize for all that." Achilles rubbed at his eyes, his hands looking strangely small without the claws. "I suppose I must retract that apology, then. I don't know what to say..."

Zagreus went to him, choosing not to sit beside him but directly on his lap, wrapping him up in a hug which he returned with utmost gentleness, as if to make up for any roughness before. He was still apologizing, a little. "It's good to have you back, Achilles," Zagreus said. "As much as I enjoyed you as a feral fish-hybrid-thing, I think I prefer you as a man."

"I'm sorry," he said again, but it was more of a tease this time. "The feral fish-hybrid-thing is a bit much for a third date."

Patroclus joined them, and Zagreus realized that what he'd been up to in the kitchen was making Achilles a cup of tea. He had to slightly disentangle himself from Zagreus, and the two of them shifted to give Pat some room on Achilles' other side, sandwiching Achilles between them. "I for one would have liked to have seen the feral nereid Achilles," Patroclus remarked.

"Absolutely not," Achilles said.

This seemed like it was about to start some amount of bickering between the two of them, except that Zagreus interjected with, "wait, Achilles, does this mean you consider blowing my back out on the dock in the middle of the pond to be a *date*?"

"That was a joke, lad."

"No no no, you just said it was a date. Are we dating again then?"

Achilles looked over his shoulder at Patroclus.

"You must know I don't mind being romantically involved with more than one person, so long as one of those people is you, that hasn't changed," Patroclus said, leaving Zagreus to wonder at the history there. And at what had happened between the two of them.

"You and I need to talk about all this, Pat," Achilles said. "When I'm less exhausted, please. But Zagreus, I... yes, you are correct in your estimation of my feelings for you."

"That's a very complicated way of saying things," Patroclus said. "Let me make it simpler." He put a hand to Achilles' cheek to turn his head, giving him a brief kiss, a motion that seemed as familiar as his calling Achilles 'my dear' a few days past. As soon as he let Achilles go, he kissed Zagreus too, lingering a little longer before pulling back and standing, squeezing Achilles' shoulder before returning to whatever else he was doing in the kitchen.

Achilles, who was less caught up on the details of the additional relationships brewing around him, gave the two of them a baffled look. "How... I thought you said you'd not had a chance. Since when...?"

"Since he had his glowing dick in me all morning," Patroclus said. "Do you want breakfast?"

Achilles frowned, and for a moment, Zagreus worried. Then, he admitted the source of his distress.

"I didn't even know it *glows*."